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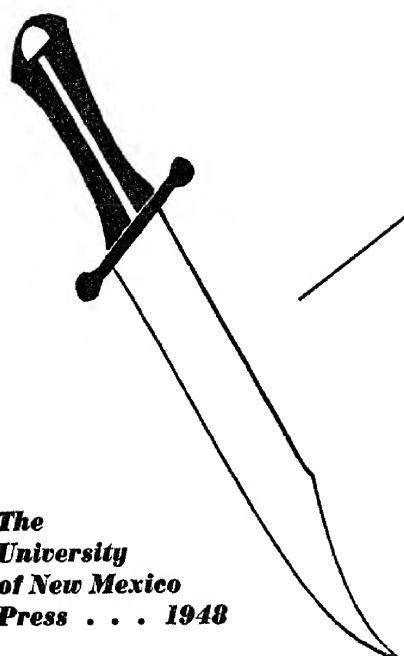
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BOWIE - KNIFE

BOWIE KNIFE



by RAYMOND W. THORP

*The
University
of New Mexico
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C O P Y R I G H T , 1948, B Y T H E U N I V E R S I T Y O F
N E W M E X I C O P R E S S — A L L R I G H T S R E S E R V E D

Foreword

MR. THORP HANDED this Bowie-Knife epic to me to read in rough manuscript form, asking for my suggestions.

It fascinated me just as it is, and I find myself unable to criticize Mr. Thorp's so lively contribution to our history. I loved this story of the Bowie-Knife, with its most interesting side-lights on the people and the times.

The work amounts to a cyclopedia of Bowiana. It will be a classic.

RUPERT HUGHES

Los Angeles, California

Preface

THIS, THE TRUE HISTORY of the origin, development, and murderous use of the Bowie-Knife, is the saga of a weapon born of environment, and perhaps necessity, in our then southwestern frontier. Its fame derived first from its initial user, Colonel James Bowie, its notoriety from repeatedly proved excellence as a fighting weapon. Its manufacture was of a quality never since duplicated among edged weapons: the art of forging blades with the keenness, beauty, and durability of the Bowie-Knife was lost, even to the inventor himself as completely as any secret of alchemy. The true Bowie-Knife passed quickly from the American scene.

This book is intended to fill what is otherwise a considerable gap in the panorama of American history. One has only to choose references at random to discover that nothing has been agreed upon concerning the Bowie's evolution. But it should no longer be necessary for the student interested in the Bowie to choose doubtfully among conflicting authorities. From original sources in no way to be doubted, the facts are herein laid bare.

When man struggles with man at closest quarters, only two ancient weapons remain essential—the knife and the club. These are elemental; these are vital; these are simple and certain. Relying on them our prehistoric ancestors

mastered beasts of a size and ferocity almost beyond our imagination. Thousands of years before the forging of metal, flint and obsidian were turned into knives, crude yet effective.

When, more than three centuries ago, the English introduced metal knives among the Indians along the Atlantic seaboard, the aborigines named them *chauqua-quock* (knife-men). For these Indians knew nothing of metal; their weapons were all of stone. The credit for bringing the first true knives to a large part of America must, therefore, go to the English. Only later, during the Colonial Wars, were the Indians all armed—by the British government—with the tomahawks and scalping knives of terrible memory.

The year 1800 saw the first extension of the knife, as a side-arm, into the West and Southwest. Prior to that time the Long-Hunters had carried skinning knives (which were also used as scalping knives), but few duels with the knife had taken place. It was at the turn of the century that the great migrations swept past the Alleghenies, thus forcing the original settlers, the Boones, the Callaways, to move on where they had “gun-room.” And the new Westerner demanded an all-purpose weapon: effective against animal or against man, quick to strike and quickly ready to strike once more, complete without difficult purchase of powder and ball.

The ordinary skinning or scalping knife could not fulfill the assignment. The revolver had not yet been invented, and the long rifle (after once discharged) was an ineffective weapon, even at close quarters. It was thus that the knife, as a major weapon of both offense and defense, was developed by frontier blacksmiths. One

of these, James Black, manufactured the best and most durable. Then on a memorable day, Black transcended his own previous efforts and brought forth that most perfect example of the cutler's skill, the Bowie-Knife.

The story of that weapon, brought to fruition on the heavy forge of a skilful backwoods blacksmith, will be told in the following pages. In this saga of the Bowie-Knife lies all the glamour of wilderness wrested from nature, all the savage adventure of a free native citizenry bent on bursting every barrier and restraint. The new weapon held the center of the American scene for more than two generations.

This work is not intended in any sense to be a history or chronology of the Bowies, or any one of them. On the contrary, only those passages in the lives of James and Rezin Bowie which are connected with the Knife in one way or another have been included. Yet by the very nature of legend James Bowie's use of the Knife brings many of his lively adventures to these pages. So also must here be related the bloodshed and the growing pains of the new West. And so, too, will appear the historians' incredible errors concerning the Knife, and the inability of so many historians to comprehend what that new West was.

For a new country, and a new generation, were dominated by James Bowie's Knife.

Acknowledgments

THE NEW MATERIAL in *Bowie-Knife* has been discovered only through the joint efforts of many collaborators. Though the author alone has given almost twenty years to this research, his work must have remained incomplete without the helpful assistance of many authorities and enthusiasts. No one person could contribute the major share of data previously so ill-assembled; yet each provided some item absolutely necessary to complete the whole.

I beg that the reader not judge the scope of the author's work by the size of his book. Indeed, the immense misinformation concerning the Bowie-Knife has long been known to American historians, with the obvious consequence that all have doubted whether the true and complete story might be written; in their eyes the Knife itself has become more or less a myth. This being true, the greater are the accomplishments of those brave souls whose names follow, since they had to travel deceiving and uncharted paths in search for what most competent authorities have regarded as a will-o'-the-wisp.

Dr. William D. McCain, Director of the Department of Archives and History, state of Mississippi, was one of the first to volunteer his assistance; when Dr. McCain

was appointed United States Archivist in conquered Italy, his former assistant, Charlotte Capers, took over his duties as Acting Director and in so doing did not forget our work.

Others who gave invaluable assistance, and to whom the author herewith tenders his thanks, include Mrs. Marie B. Owen, Director of Archives and History, state of Alabama; Mr. Dallas T. Herndon, author and historian, and Executive Secretary of the Arkansas History Commission; Mrs. J. E. Hays, State Historian of Georgia; Mr. Bayless Hardin, Director of Historical and Genealogical Research, Kentucky State Historical Society; the late Mr. Robert J. Usher, Librarian, Howard Memorial Library of the Tulane University of Louisiana; Mr. Raphael Semmes, Librarian, Maryland Historical Society; Mrs. John Trotwood Moore, State Librarian and Archivist, Tennessee Department of Education; Mr. Ike Moore, Director, San Jacinto Museum of History Association of Texas; Mr. Donald Coney, Librarian, the University of Texas; the entire historical and genealogical staffs of the Los Angeles Public Library system; Mr. W. H. Etter, Mayor of Washington, Arkansas, and publisher of the *Washington Telegraph*; and the late Mr. Claudius Jones, of Little Rock, Arkansas, who until his recent death was the last surviving friend of the Bowie-Knife's inventor.

All photo copying and photostatic work was prepared by my good friend, the late Leo G. Young, of Los Angeles.

Even with such assistance there were periods of disappointment and discouragement. But each time I was pre-

vailed upon by my family, particularly by my brother, James T. Thorp of Missouri, to continue the work. Without their kindest encouragement, augmented by a final boost from Colonel Rupert Hughes, *Bowie-Knife* would have long since been laid away in despair.

RAYMOND W. THORP

Los Angeles, California

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1

JAMES BOWIE'S KNIFE



I. A NEW WEAPON, A NEW WEST

“WILL THE MEMBER please repeat his last words? I fear that my ears have been playing me tricks!”

The atmosphere was tense in the Arkansas House of Representatives on that crisp morning of December 4, 1837. Not, to be sure, from any conflict as to vital policy, though the measure under scrutiny was appropriate enough in that raw frontier commonwealth: A bill to authorize bounties for the killing of wolves. A trivial matter, of course, simply one more trivial but essential matter for the magistrates, those state officers who themselves were of essential, yet trivial, authority.

But now the Member from Randolph County, Major J. J. Anthony, chose to ridicule the Speaker of the House;

the Speaker, Colonel John Wilson, immediately demanded Anthony's meaning.

The Assemblymen knew that trouble was imminent. By the sharp instinct of frontiersmen living near death day to day, they sensed a feud near flaming. As one man they rose to their feet, a sinister swishing to their coattails, and the clank of metal. One only half alive to the situation could have observed the dull lustre of pistol butts, and the brightly burnished hilts of Bowie-Knives. The Assemblymen riveted their eyes upon the Speaker.

Wilson was a small man, perhaps five feet eight in height. He leaned over the Speaker's railing; his face flushed behind the sweeping moustache, eyes wildly glaring; his fingers drummed nervously upon the wood as he awaited the answer to his query. "Will the Member please repeat his last words?"

Major Anthony was a tall, florid, powerfully built man about ten years younger than the Speaker. His dark mustache, twirled at the ends, was liberally dosed with bear grease and pole-cat oil; the curve of his full lips suggested a permanent sneer. In the backwoods districts of Randolph County he was known as "sound on the goose," and his courage reckoned as "huckleberry above the persimmon." He had served in the War of 1812 as a defender of Fort Sandusky, and subsequently in the Creek War under Old Hickory, by whom he was esteemed.

"I stated only that I object to the word 'magistrate,' Mr. Speaker," Anthony said. He smirked, and one hand reached up, caressing his whiskers. "I believe there should be more dignity attached to the office of one who receives oaths in the state of Arkansas. Strike out 'magistrate,' and write in, say, 'President of the Real Estate Bank.' "

The Assemblymen could see that Wilson was holding himself in only by a herculean effort. His knuckles showed white as he grasped the railing; his face, already flushed, now turned livid.

"The Member from Randolph knows, of course, that I am the President of the Real Estate Bank?"

Anthony, now smiling broadly, nodded. Someone snickered. Everyone present knew his scorn of the bank.

But Wilson seemed aware only of his one antagonist, Anthony. "Then I take it," he said, very quietly, "I take it you mean to insult the Chair? And if you do, God damn you, you will take it back mighty quick!"

One of Anthony's hands left the chair-back and fumbled with his coat. "I do not mean any offense, Mr. Speaker," he retorted, "but I am still of the opinion that the certificates should be signed by a man of great importance, *such as yourself!*"

Wilson bounded from the rostrum. Advancing toward Anthony, he flicked his long coattails aside with swift certainty, and in that instant there appeared in his right hand a gleaming Bowie-Knife "with blade nine inches long." The spectators moved in upon the principals, forming a space in the center perhaps ten feet square, from which chairs had been removed in scant seconds.

Anthony now ceased fumbling with his coat. The tails being brushed aside, there appeared in his hand the grandfather of Wilson's weapon: a Bowie-Knife "with blade twelve inches long." He advanced upon Wilson and with the huge knife, struck two sidewise, murderous blows at his enemy. The first was a clean miss, but the second caught Wilson's left—and guarding—arm just below the elbow. The keen edge slashed through cloth and flesh to

the bone, and a stream of blood spurted into the air.

Wilson had taken the attack with firmness. Now he came forward with his almost severed arm hanging limply. Despite pain and much loss of blood, he seemed cool. Anthony lost his nerve—and threw his Knife!

Wilson bobbed under in the nick of time and continued forward; the weapon buried itself in the rostrum. Anthony next seized and hurled a chair, but struck only a glancing blow. With a wild yell of fright the now fear-ridden man grasped another chair and sought to hold it between his foe and himself. Appalled at the deadly nature of the duel, a friend of both men attempted to interpose between them, but was brushed aside: Darting beneath Anthony's chair, Wilson swept his Bowie upward in a mighty stroke. The blade sank its full nine inches in Anthony's chest.

The Speaker himself fell to the floor, weak from loss of blood. But on hands and knees he crawled to his dead opponent, withdrew his Bowie, wiped it clean on Anthony's coat, replaced it in its sheath, and fainted.¹

A blade so deadly as in one short year to displace the pistol and relegate the sword-cane to oblivion; a weapon so fearful as to be singled out for drastic state bans; steel so universally used that even the most respectable must "tote a Bowie" or shun all society—what was this Knife?

Bowies were drinking blood from New Orleans to

¹ Quotations as to length of Bowie-Knives from *Niles Register*, June 23, 1838 (LIV, 17: 5th Ser. v. 4), 258. For this duel see also Weston Arthur Goodspeed's *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northeast Arkansas*, 104, 105; and Dallas T. Herndon's *Executive and Legislative History of Arkansas*, 36. Goodspeed goes on from the duel to relate that Wilson was exonerated, "Guilty of excusable homicide." He was, however, expelled by the Assembly, and the Speaker's seat taken by Grandison Royston, the mutual friend who tried to separate the duelists.

Dubuque and from Savannah to the Brazos. Because of the Bowie, Mississippi steamers were transformed into floating morgues, towns depopulated, whole families wiped out overnight. By competent woodsman and frontier killer, the Bowie was quickly recognized as a weapon of most certain effect. And in fashionable European drawing rooms, the Knife became symbol of America—America understood as an uncivilized wilderness peopled only by the most bloodthirsty assassins.

The Bowie was used in the early western border wars and throughout the Civil War. It killed in Indian campaigns, and slashed along the cattle trails. No tool of class or faction, but the favored weapon of all, the Bowie served alike state legislator and blackleg gambler, formal duelist and stalking murderer—as well as professional soldier and hunter. In politics and in war, for purposes of empire and of outlawry, the Bowie played its role.

And after the West was won, after the blood stopped running, little wonder that the Bowie graduated to the dime novel, the magazine of adventure, and the theatre. For no other single weapon, no other single man, no single force in our empire building so wrought upon the mass imagination as did James Bowie and his Knife.

In 1862 an English cousin wrote to Weir Mitchell, distinguished Philadelphia lawyer and scientist:

Probably you will be surprised to hear that people (in London) draw their conclusions as to the civilization and refinement of America more from what they hear of duels and Bowie-Knives and wars in the legislature than from all other things put together. The Americans are believed here to be a lawless people. . . .²

² A. R. Burr, *Weir Mitchell, His Life and Letters*, 101.

2. THE BATTLE ON VIDALIA SANDBAR

ACCORDING TO MOST accounts, the first use and first notoriety of Bowie's Knife were incidental to an enormous free-for-all near the Mississippi River. The date was September 19, 1827, the battleground a sand spit opposite Natchez, the participants anywhere up to fifty in number, and the pretext a duel between Samuel Levi Wells and Dr. Thomas Maddox.

Now no such enormous number were involved as the old tales would have us believe. Nor, though Bowie indeed fought at Vidalia Sandbar, did he kill more than one opponent. Nor, finally, was the Bowie-Knife used in that greatly exaggerated affair, for it had not been invented!

Yet I will start my story at Vidalia Sandbar. Right or wrong, it is writer's and reader's usual custom (and prerogative) to wish their histories begun with scenes of furious activity. And the fact is unforgettable: James Bowie was a knifeman of skill and some little fame before ever his "Bowie-Knife" was forged. His deeds on Vidalia Sandbar were extraordinary, with or without the Knife; the frontiersman cannot be belittled to the glory of his weapon. That in earlier melees James Bowie used a knife to great effect, and later became famous for use of that Knife which bore his name, is surely more than coincidence.

This "Battle on Vidalia Sandbar" has indeed assumed major importance in the whole Bowie legend; folklore too starts the Knife's saga at Vidalia. Enough, then, of excuses; here follows, with special reference to the published accounts of one "old Mississippian" and one "lad,"

an account of that yet famous battle which never took place. For the skirmish actually fought, and the battle described, are in almost no detail alike.

According to our "old Mississippian" witness,¹ forty or more engaged. The spectacle was well attended, he tells us, the high Natchez bluffs being thronged with spectators, and a steamer rounded to in the river—its decks "black with passengers." It was a "dreadful scene," and "the greatest duel on record."

In the accounts Bowie himself, in properly dramatic fashion, is the first wounded. One vivid "witness," writing over fifty years later, tells us that Bowie was shot in the hip by Colonel Robert Crain, then clubbed to the ground with the empty pistol. After pulling himself to his feet, he was attacked by Norris Wright with a long slender sword, the point of which bent and went around a rib. Bowie, the story continues, fell to the ground and from that position reached up, pulled Wright down to him, and dispatched him with "a Knife invented by his brother Rezin"—crying, "Now, Major, you die!"

New "witnesses," arising over the years, added further details. Newspaper publication of one account usually brought amplification—as well as violent contradiction, denial and new affirmation, and a stream of "eyewitness" reports—to the bewildered editors. In the *San Francisco Chronicle* one "L. P. H.," writing some fifty years after the event, insisted that the original duel never took place! That, on the contrary, friends of Maddox and Wells went

¹ There were no witnesses at the actual battle, as will appear. The accounts of "witnesses" to the battle are quoted at length, with references, in Chapter 8. Meanwhile the reader is assured that he will find far more gory details in *Bowie-Knife* than in the fictional battle here rejected.

over from Natchez to make peace, utilizing in the process much wine and many Havana cigars. That, however, Bowie and Colonel Crain, deadly enemies who had promised to stay away, appeared with thirst for blood and precipitated the fray.

“L. P. H.” states further that he attended as a mere lad, holding his father’s hand. “I am happy to relate,” he adds, “that my father was the first to say: ‘Men, lets rush in between them and stop the fighting!’” In this account it was Colonel Crain instead of Major Wright who was killed by Bowie, and Crain was dispatched with his own sword instead of Bowie’s knife!

Now I have chosen in another section to point out the consistent major errors of our reference books, in almost any mention of Bowie. Though disagreeing as to every other point of Bowie’s life history, one statement almost invariably appears: that the Bowie-Knife was christened at Vidalia Sandbar, and that *six* were there killed, *fifteen* wounded!

One very naturally wonders how the precise figures were reached: Certainly there is no such reckoning in contemporary accounts. Or how the encyclopedists decided that Bowie could use a knife invented three years later: Bowie was not born with his Knife. Or for that matter how the editors could choose between the accounts of later years, all of them embroidered into legend, and legend’s hopeless contradictions! (Or why they chose to overlook the accurate, and consistent, contemporary accounts.)

The false legends which have accumulated over more than a century, introducing the Bowie-Knife in that melee of 1827, have provided innumerable magazine stories,

slick and pulp alike. In newspapers, in monographs, in college theses and in the volumes of learned men, the repeated errors find new circulation. Yet the contemporary accounts, themselves a little exaggerated perhaps as a good story must grow even in first telling, are modest indeed as compared with the wild inventions of later years.

I have relied particularly, in the following reconstruction, on reports in the *Niles Register* (November 17, 1827) and the *New Orleans Argus* (October 1, 1827), the latter account being by Samuel L. Wells, one of the original duelists. I have talked, too, with the grandson of General Montfort Wells, rumor about whom precipitated the affair. For the true history of that day on Vidalia Sandbar had its ample fascination.

There is perhaps no historical parallel, in point of scrambled hatreds and staunch loyalties, to the Sandbar battle of 1827. The participants were all men of standing in their communities, their mutual dislike already long notorious. Their choice of Vidalia for private war was apt, for the Sandbar was legendary as a dueling ground before ever the Messrs. Maddox and Wells staged their duel.

Vidalia was not an island, as has been erroneously supposed, but a long, heavily-wooded peninsula on the western shore of the Mississippi, connected with the mainland by a narrow strip of brushy ground. Only the center was bare, except for the piled driftwood and numerous snags; here men fought and were killed.

Joseph Vidal, an early French settler whose plantation (Concordia) was directly connected, had proffered the use of the peninsula for a dueling ground as early as

1806. Here Major Ferdinand Claiborne had dueled with Captain Benjamin Farar, among the snags and flotsam. On this lonely strand the pistols of Governor George Poindexter of Mississippi had claimed the life of Abijah Hunt. General Winfield Scott, United States Army, the pride of the backwoodsmen, had here met Dr. Upshaw, to answer for Scott's criticism of Captain James Wilkinson. All these, and unknown hosts of the less famous, had fought and killed on the Sandbar: it was such a sequence of death which the 1827 battle now climaxed. For the hates of Wells and Maddox, Bowie and Wright, had reached a pitch more bitter than had ever before caused blood to spill on Vidalia's sands.

There was of course the difference between the original participants, Samuel Levi Wells and Dr. Thomas H. Maddox. A long-suppressed dislike, a desire to belittle, a woman patient retailing to Maddox sordid gossip about Wells' brother: the results are easily predicted. The scandal, a very attractive bit of scandal, concerned General Montfort Wells, Samuel Wells' elder brother. Naturally the good Doctor Maddox wasted no time in exercising his verbal talents, and the story raced the rounds until it reached the General, who called upon Maddox with a peremptory demand to know his informant. Being chivalrous (albeit enjoying his position as middleman), Dr. Maddox refused to divulge anything beyond the statement that his informant was "a lady."² (We do not, indeed, know her name to this day.) This explanation not sufficing, insults were exchanged, and the two separated with vows of mayhem. It was about two

² Statement made in 1927 to the author by James O. Wells, of Houston, Texas, grandson of General Wells.

weeks later that Maddox and the General met on the streets of Alexandria. Wells was armed with a shotgun, and he pulled both triggers on sight. His sight, however, was not the best in the world (he had cataracts), and only a bystander was killed.

Unscathed but somewhat shaken, Dr. Maddox disappeared into his office ahead of his flying coattails. A messenger shortly carried his note of challenge to the General, and with as great dispatch brought back to him an acceptance—from Samuel Levi Wells. The acceptance indicated that the writer's brother was an old man; that his eyesight was abominable, as had recently been proved; but that the writer would himself be glad to render satisfaction. Maddox signifying his acquiescence, the duel was arranged, and friends notified. In permitting the substitution, Maddox, of course, upheld both letter and spirit of the duelist's code.

Wells' chosen seconds were five: his brother, Thomas Jefferson Wells (but not the General); General Samuel Cuny, the latter's doctor brother, James Bowie, and George C. McWherters. Ranged in opposition, with Maddox, were Major Norris Wright, Colonel Robert H. Crain, the Blanchard brothers, Alfred and Carey; and one Denny, a surgeon. Beyond these, there were no eyewitnesses.

There is every reason to believe that the duel soon assumed secondary importance; it was simply a formal beginning for a general battle. In their riot of terrible hates, of bitterness longing for expression in action, the participants could hardly have devised a better plan for mutual extermination.

Colonel Crain was the deadly enemy of General Cuny.

Though described as "the personification of chivalry," Crain is known to have paid many honest debts with bullets. It had proved cheaper for him, since he had an unhealthy habit (for others) of borrowing money. When he received a bill from a creditor, he usually paid off with a challenge. He had once killed a creditor, and had himself been wounded by General Cuny for refusing to pay a note endorsed by Cuny's father. The elder Cuny had paid the note, and the General beat Crain to the post by sending his own challenge. In the subsequent duel Crain was seriously wounded, and from that moment hate had been added to his natural indignation against Cuny.

Alfred Blanchard and Thomas Jefferson Wells were old and tried enemies. Blanchard had once ambushed and wounded Wells in the darkness of night. Then too, the Blanchards were related by marriage to Colonel Crain, whereas the Wells and Cuny families were old friends.

James Bowie, also a stalwart friend to the Wells brothers, had his own deadly enmity toward Wright. Wright and Bowie had indeed long been sparring, each waiting some opportunity for battle. Major Wright was a director of the Alexandria bank, and his voice had recently been decisive in refusing Bowie a loan with which he desired to save a valuable property from foreclosure. The pair were also political enemies, and shortly after Bowie lost his loan they had met on Alexandria's streets. Bowie was unarmed at the time, but Wright had a pistol, which he drew and fired. The bullet glanced from Bowie's ribs and he rushed his opponent, knocking him down. Friends parted the two before Bowie could get in a killing blow, and after the affair everyone knew that one of the two was living on borrowed time.

Such were the members of the expedition to Vidalia on that early September morning of 1827. No "friends" or "partisans" of any of the principals attended the affair, and there were no "outside" spectators on that trip, which had been arranged in all secrecy. Nor did any palatial steamer lie to off the Natchez bluffs, "crowded with passengers." No heroic interventionist led his little son by the hand to see a Battle of Forty Assassins. On the contrary there was no visible excitement whatever—just a silent dozen of grim and unsmiling men slowly moving in the dark before dawn, each of whom already knew deadly combat. Vidalia was no picnic ground. By mutual agreement the two parties, with the exception of Wells and Maddox, the principals, retired to separate copses of willows to await the outcome of the duel. The entire company was situated as in a V, with the principals about a quarter of a mile distant over the windswept, sandy plain.

The first proceedings were entirely routine. Wells and Maddox faced each other at ten paces just as the sun touched the heights of Natchez. By agreement of both parties, James Bowie stood forth from the willows and called out the command to fire. Taking careful aim, the participants pulled trigger, Maddox a trifle ahead of Wells. Both missed. They reloaded, and this time Major Wright gave the command which caused fire and lead to spurt from their weapons. But again neither man had been hit, and Maddox called out to his opponent. The two men then advanced toward each other, met, shook hands. The preliminary farce was finished; the time was come for general battle.

Simultaneously there was a stirring in the two patches

of willows. The separate groups of antagonists strode into the open. Converging upon one another in a diagonal double line, they walked toward the principals, who were to all appearance in amicable discussion, no longer intent upon taking life. James Bowie and General Cuny led the one faction, and Major Norris Wright and Colonel Crain the other. There was no mistaking their common purpose. When they came in close proximity General Cuny called out to Crain:

"We might as well settle our own troubles, here and now." As he spoke, Cuny drew a pistol, but Crain, pistol already in hand, fired first. Bowie, however, stepped in front of Cuny and stopped the bullet with his hip. Cuny now was ready, and fired under Bowie's arm, the bullet striking Crain in his gun arm. Crain, at once drawing a second pistol with his uninjured hand, fired again, into General Cuny's left breast, and stretched him dying upon the sand.

Bowie, who had been knocked off his feet by Crain's first shot, now got up, and, drawing a large butcher knife, bore down upon his attacker. Crain waited until he came within reach, and before he could use the knife struck him a powerful blow with his empty pistol, felling him again. Crain then took to his heels.

Wright, who had drawn a sword cane and was feinting about, attempting to get a thrust at his old enemy without encountering him face to face, now raced up to the prostrate Bowie and ran the stiletto-like blade into his chest. He then attempted to withdraw the weapon by placing one foot upon his enemy and pulling up on the sword. The blade broke off short, and Bowie seized the hand that held the upper portion and jerked Wright downward.

There was a tremendous sweep of the butcher knife, and Wright, disemboweled, died. Bowie then got to his feet.

Alfred Blanchard now bore down upon Bowie, who was attempting to withdraw the slender sword-cane blade from his chest. When within about twenty feet, Blanchard aimed and fired, the ball striking Bowie in the left arm, his third wound at the hand of three antagonists. Bowie rushed at Blanchard and with his knife stripped the flesh from Blanchard's forearm; the latter then turned and fled toward his brother, who on his part, fired at Bowie and missed. The Blanchards then fled the scene; as they ran George McWherters shot and wounded Carey Blanchard.

The Maddox party had now left the field, the deaths being one to each faction. The battle of Vidalia was finished; the whole affair (which has since used up thousands of feet of type, and equal thousands of hours of literary effort) had occupied an interval of less than ten minutes, following the bloodless duel between Wells and Maddox.

Bowie, who had lost much blood, and from whose back protruded several inches of sword-blade, now fell. His friends surrounded him; and Dr. Cuny, who had ministered to his brother until the latter's decease, went back to work. With large forceps he withdrew the sword. Taking medicines and bandages from his kit, he staunched the flow of blood, and with probe and scalpel then removed the bullets that had lodged in Bowie's arm and hip.

His brawny frame racked with pain, James Bowie was carried on an improvised willow stretcher back to the ferry-boat. There the party boarded the vessel and steamed back across the river to Natchez, leaving their erstwhile antagonists hiding among the willows. The honors were even; nobody had won the battle of Vidalia.

“L. P. H.” tells us—and this one can hardly doubt—that “Bowie lay for months in the city of Natchez before he recovered from his wounds.” But a *butcher knife* had saved James Bowie’s life. The dreaded Bowie-Knife had not yet carved its way into the bloody southwestern frontier.

3. JAMES BLACK’S FORGE: A TRAGIC HISTORY

IT WAS JAMES BLACK who contrived and forged the Knife: curved forward blade, short dagger-like backhand blade, all in steel of most wonderful tempering. James Bowie, using the Knife, even in early death won lasting fame. But James Black, inventor of both Knife and secret techniques of tempering, lost health, lost fame, lost even memory of his own methods.

Black’s history is easily enough accessible—though as so frequently in the Bowie saga many “authorities” persist in ignoring obvious sources. Say, then, that, in Arkansas at least, acknowledged first home of the Knife, Black is known as sole creator of the Knife—not Rezin Bowie (James Bowie’s brother), not some mysterious Blackman, not even James himself.

The passages next following are thus not all new to the printed page. However, few draw directly from Weston A. Goodspeed (*Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northeast Arkansas*, 1889), Fay Hempstead (*A Pictorial History of Arkansas*, 1890), W. F. Pope (*Early Days in Arkansas*, 1895), and some more recent writers.¹

¹ Especially Dallas T. Herndon *High Lights of Arkansas History*, 1922. All these sources, as they may differ in details, are quoted in

And even these do not trace, or appear to know, Black's tragic history after his creation of the Knife.

But far richer even than such excellent printed sources were the unpublished manuscript of the late Governor D. Webster Jones of Arkansas, and the memories of the Governor's son, the late Claudius Jones, of Little Rock. Before his death, in early 1943, Mr. Claudius Jones, to my great fortune, provided me with verification of the known facts and a whole body of new data concerning the life of the inventor of the Bowie-Knife. The Jones family, as will appear, knew Black through peculiarly intimate contacts.

Dr. Isaac N. Jones, grandfather to Claudius, stands among the most eminent of Arkansas pioneers, and was friend to the Bowies and also Davy Crockett. It is related in the *Niles Register*, August 27, 1836, how Isaac Jones wrote to Crockett's widow, extending condolences and telling of Crockett's visit to him en route to the Alamo. Crockett had sold Jones his watch, and this watch the Joneses now returned.

Isaac Jones's son (and Claudius Jones's father), D. Webster Jones, served in many capacities as an Arkansas lawmaker and was governor from 1897 to 1901; no family has ever stood higher in Arkansas. The story of Bowie and James Black enters the life of four Jones generations, and the part played by the later generations will appear in these pages.

James Black was born in Hackensack, New Jersey, May 1, 1800. His mother died when he reached four; shortly thereafter Black's father remarried, and, as in

Section III of the present work—and a fascinating store of fact and legend they all provide.

any proper romance, stepmother and child could not get along. At the age of eight, or four years after his father remarried, the lad ran away to Philadelphia. He was seized by the authorities upon arrival and, since he refused to tell where he lived, apprenticed out to a manufacturer, according to the custom of the time. He did not himself know his correct age, but because of his strong physique he was placed in indentures as being eleven.

The man to whom young Black had been apprenticed was a manufacturer of silver plate. The apprentice proved apt and before long became a most finished workman. He served his trade until 1818, when he was officially twenty-one, but actually eighteen years of age. He then decided to follow the tide of migration westward.

With a fellow artisan, one Jacques Dureaux, young Black secured passage on the stage to Cincinnati, where the pair parted company. Dureaux went on to Saint Louis, while Black took passage on a steamer down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans. Finding little opportunity there to ply his trade, and after casting about for a time, he took a job as handyman on a ferry-boat at Bayou Sara. This job, however, did not last long. Black had served a long, weary apprenticeship in a master's trade, hence soon tired—so he later said—of being bossed around by a drunken Creole. He accordingly went back to New Orleans, secured a job as deck hand on a steamer headed for the Red River, and thus set out for the wilderness.

Here, it would seem, destiny took a hand, a destiny that was to bring the products of his as yet unknown skill to world-wide fame—and Black himself to an unmarked grave. While steaming upriver, the young man struck up

an acquaintance with another young Easterner who intended to pioneer the wild country along the Arkansas and Red rivers: Elijah Stuart. Stuart and Black determined to join forces, and strike into this new country.

They debarked at a point known as Fulton on the Red River, went inland about fourteen miles, and staked out the settlement later known as Washington, Hempstead County, Arkansas. This was in the early spring of 1824. Situated on the old Southwest or Chihuahua Trail to Texas, over which in later years the first settlers of Texas were to tread their way, the settlement grew rapidly. Elijah Stuart built and kept a tavern, which from the start did a rushing business. James Black, without money, but with his remarkable skill in working metals, found employment with a blacksmith named Shaw, who had set up a large shop to take care of the overland trade. Their agreement was that Shaw and his two sons would take care of the rough business, such as shoeing horses and re-tiring vehicles, and other odds and ends, while Black was to devote his entire time to the making and mending of guns and knives. This arrangement was particularly suitable to the young smith, since it gave him an opportunity to work in precious metals.

As the trade prospered Shaw took Black into equal partnership. Relationships were most friendly, Shaw's eldest son and Black becoming inseparable companions, and attending together all the rude frontier celebrations and horse races. But when the old blacksmith's eldest daughter, Anne, formed an even closer attachment for the young metal-worker, Shaw for some never-to-be-explained reason, forbade most vehemently his daughter to marry his young co-worker.

Black had fallen deeply in love with Anne, and he knew the feeling was reciprocated. Among the pioneers of that day, however—as to some degree throughout the country—no marriage could be joined against parental opposition. Black accordingly, upon securing the troth of his beloved, made a settlement with Shaw for his share of the business and moved farther into the wilderness. He reasoned that, in time, Shaw would relent. But his ignorance of Shaw's nature was equaled only by his own stern adherence to a moral code.

At the Rolling Fork of the Cossatot River, with none but Indians and a few white adventurers to the west of him, Black built his cabin. After a few months others joined him, and as the company grew the young man determined to erect a dam in the river, and a grist mill.

Since he was practically without money (having, he thought, taken a 400-day note from Shaw in lieu of cash settlement), he went considerably into debt to the neighbors who worked for him on this project; still with their assistance he had almost completed dam and mill when the high sheriff came and read, from President Andrew Jackson, a proclamation that they were on Indian territory and must leave at once.

Black was in a most difficult position. He owed his helpers seven hundred dollars; his only asset was his skill, and the only place where the skill could be applied, back with Shaw. Swallowing his pride and returning to Washington, Black first attempted to collect from Shaw some of the money owed on the settlement—and discovered to his horror that nothing was legally due him. For the papers that he had hastily signed dissolved the partnership without mention of financial considerations!

Sadly disillusioned but hardly, as it turned out, any wiser, Black took his revenge by at last ignoring Shaw's wishes and marrying Anne. Then, with the aid of friends, he set up an opposition shop in blacksmithing and metal-working. Whether wittingly or no, he thus incurred Shaw's satanic, almost incredible hatred.

The first years went well. Black was happily married to the woman of his choice, and he was a leader in a prosperous trade which would enable him to pay off his debts. The great Texas excitement was on, and men of every type took the trail. All were heavily armed, since in that time and place law-abiding and cut-throat alike relied chiefly upon the knife, whether for offense or defense. Black dedicated his skill to supplying their needs.

All day long and sometimes well into the night, Black's forge roared, his hammer clanked upon metal. As orders began to pile up, Black took young Shaw, his brother-in-law, into the business. Gleaming knives with razor-like edges were stacked by the work-bench; black walnut and buckhorn strips lay alongside in readiness to be affixed in any manner desired, as handles.

Despite their friendship, Black never allowed young Shaw to learn his techniques of tempering and hardening the steel. His secret processes he practiced alone, curtained off in the back of the shop, from which even Anne was excluded.

According to Governor Jones, who observed Black make many knives, the smith did not consider a blade of sufficient worth until it passed the "hickory test." Black took each blade in turn as it was finished and whittled on a seasoned hickory block for an hour. If at the end of that time it would not smoothly shave the hair from his

arm, the knife was discarded. "I am certain that Black possessed the Damascus secret," Governor Jones wrote. "He often told me that no one taught him his method of tempering steel, but that it came to him in a mysterious manner which he could not explain."

Black's knowledge of silversmithing enabled him to plate his works with precious metals, and thus they ranged in price from five to fifty-two dollars each, according to the amount of gold or silver used, and the method of application. Many were the odd and beautiful designs he worked into the higher-priced blades; yet his lowest-priced, or five-dollar knife, with neither plating nor engraving, was, for efficiency, on a par with the best.

Such was James Black's skill; his fame as cutler without peer reached all the wild vastness of the Southwest; from all the woods settlements, from far-off St. Louis and New Orleans, the orders poured in.

James Bowie came riding up the Chihuahua Trail early in December, 1830. He had just received his papers from the Mexican Government as a citizen of Coahuila,² and was headed for the plantation of his brother, Rezin P. Bowie, at Walnut Hills. He stopped at Washington to see James Black, and to order one of the knives of which he had heard. He had, as was customary, whittled out a model for Black to follow.

James Black took Bowie's model, studied it for a few moments, and promised to copy it in steel. Bowie rode on, promising to return for the weapon in about four weeks.

At the appointed time Bowie showed up once more at the blacksmith shop, whereupon Black laid before him for

² For fuller details as to this and other episodes in Bowie's life, see Section IV of this book.

his inspection not one, but two knives. He explained to Bowie that heretofore he had always made knives according to the customers' specifications, but that in this instance he had decided to make another, as he had always thought a knife should be made "for peculiar purposes." He asked Bowie to take his choice. James Bowie took the knives in hand, testing each for balance as well as for keenness of edge and resiliency. He was a connoisseur of such weapons, and it did not take him long to decide that Black's pattern was the better of the two. Both knives were singled-edged, but that made according to the blacksmith's ideas was double-edged along the length of the curve from the point. This was the innovation that appealed to Bowie; he chose Black's model and discarded his own.

Shortly after, on his return journey to Texas, Bowie was attacked by three desperados, hired for the express purpose of killing him.³ These three rushed Bowie from the underbrush, knives in hand. One seized the bridle of Bowie's horse, but as he did so Bowie drew his new Knife, reached over the horse's neck, and with one blow struck off the assassin's head. One of the others succeeded in stabbing Bowie before the latter could dismount, but the blow was a glancing one, on the calf of the leg. Bounding from the saddle, Bowie swung his Knife upward, disemboweling this second antagonist. The third at once attempted flight, but Bowie overtook him and split his skull to the shoulders.

This was the battle that gave to Bowie and his Knife an undying fame. The weapon that Black had made was the most terrible blade ever devised.

³ See account of duel with John Sturdivant in Chapter 13.

The new weapon's efficiency was quickly recognized. It was to this Knife that Davy Crockett's *Autobiography* refers:

Shortly after arriving at the Alamo I was introduced to Colonel Bowie by Colonel Travis, and was conversing with him when Bowie had occasion to draw his famous knife to cut a strap. The very sight of it was enough to give a man of squeamish stomach the colic, especially before breakfast. He saw I was admiring it, and, said he, "Colonel, you might tickle a fellow's ribs a long time with this little instrument before you'd make him laugh; and many a time I have seen a man puke at the thought of the point touching the pit of his stomach."

Black too shared, for his few remaining years of health, in the fame of the Knife he had made. Wrote Governor Jones:

After this (Bowie's duel with the three assassins) when anyone ordered a knife from Black, instead of bringing along his own pattern, he would order that it be made "like Bowie's," which was finally shortened into "Make me a Bowie-Knife."

Anne Black died in 1838, leaving her husband with three boys and a girl. In the last two years Black had acquired a comfortable fortune for that period. But he had never succeeded one whit in appeasing his father-in-law, and after Anne's death Shaw lost no opportunity to harass the knifesmith.

In the summer of 1839, finally, Shaw saw his chance, Black being severely ill, in bed, and waited upon by his small children—Shaw's grandchildren! Awaiting his best opportunity, Shaw one day entered Black's house when no other person was present and attacked the sick man with a large club. Black would have been killed but for

the intervention of his dog, which rushed in and seized the would-be murderer by the throat. But Shaw's terrible clubbing caused Black's eyes to become inflamed, and resulted in his almost total blindness.

As soon as he had recovered sufficiently from illness and his clubbing, and had put his affairs in shape, Black started east, thinking to consult the surgeons of Philadelphia, his old home. But while on a steamboat on the Ohio, he was introduced by the captain to a man who seemed much interested in his case. This fellow told of a celebrated eye doctor who was then practicing in Cincinnati, and prevailed upon Black to deboard and consult this physician. The latter turned out to be an unprincipled empiric for whom Black's steamboat acquaintance was a runner, with the result that after a series of treatments the little remaining eyesight was destroyed.

Now totally blind, his purse sadly depleted, Black continued on by stage to Philadelphia, where he remained a year under treatment by various doctors, none of whom succeeded in relieving his critical condition. Returning to Arkansas indirectly, he was examined in New Orleans by the celebrated Dr. Stone, who told him there was no hope of regaining his sight.

But the worst was yet to come. Upon reaching home, Black discovered that his property had somehow been liquidated by his unprincipled father-in-law, who had fled with the proceeds. James Black was blind, homeless, and penniless.

Now there lived at this time on their Red River plantation two most excellent pioneer gentlemen, Jake and John Buzzard. Learning of Black's condition, these brothers at once invited him to make his home with them. (His chil-

dren had been adopted into pioneer neighbors' families.) Black lived with them for two years. Then, in 1842, Black learned of Dr. Isaac N. Jones, a skilful surgeon recently come to Washington from Bowie County, Texas. (Dr. Jones was no stranger to Arkansas, having lived in the state before.) At Black's request, the Buzzard brothers sent him to Washington to see Dr. Jones.

Following a preliminary examination, Jones said there might be some slight chance of restoring partial sight to Black's right eye, but that it would be necessary for him to remain in Washington, to be treated day by day. Black of course had to tell the doctor that he was in utter destitution, and must remain with his friends.

"If you will come and live with me, I will care for you," said Dr. Jones. "Your condition is no fault of your own. I will trust to the future for compensation. Come and live among my family."

The rest of Black's story can best be told by Governor D. Webster Jones, in his unpublished manuscript. The Governor wrote:

Dr. Isaac N. Jones was my father, and at the time James Black came to live with us, I was an infant just beginning to prattle. My father used his best skill in an effort to restore Black's sight, but all to no avail. Being honest, he told his patient that it would be futile to torture him with further treatments. "But," said my father, "you need have no fears. You shall live with us always."

My father died in February, 1858; but Black, with the full consent of the family, remained with us. Following the decease of my mother in January, 1867, I took him to my home, where he lived until his death, which occurred June 22, 1872. Altogether, he lived with us some thirty years.

Black was always a welcome member in our family. His kindly mien and fatherly advice to my brothers and myself endeared him to us all. He was especially attached to my eldest brother, Isaac, and after Isaac's death at the age of fourteen, the old man transferred his affection to me. While he lived in my father's house, the doctor's office was his room, and I slept there frequently, read to him, and led him about the premises.

Mr. Black was a man of extraordinary memory, and was always made the referee in controversies among the older settlers when they failed to agree concerning some occurrence of earlier times. Time and again, when I was a boy, he would say to me that notwithstanding his great misfortune, God had blessed him by giving him a good home among friends, and that one day, when I had reached maturity, he would disclose to me his secret of tempering steel.

I did not press him as to this, although naturally very curious, and it was not until my mother's death, when he moved into my home, that it seemed he was getting ready to trust me with his secret.

On May 1, 1870, which was his seventieth birthday Mr. Black told me that, since in the ordinary course of nature he could not expect to live much longer, he had decided that the time had arrived. He stated that I was old enough and sufficiently well-acquainted with the affairs of the world to properly utilize the secret, and that if I would procure pen, ink and paper, he would communicate his knowledge to me.

I lost no time in bringing the materials to him. After sitting in silence for awhile he said: "In the first place"—and then stopped and began rubbing his brow with the fingers of his right hand.

He continued in this way for some minutes, as if trying to reconstruct something in his mind, and then, still rubbing his brow, said: "Go away and come back in an hour."

I did so, but remained close to the open door where I could

see him, and not for one moment did he take his fingers from his brow, or change his position.

At the expiration of the hour I went in and spoke to him. Without a perceptible movement, he said: "Go out again, and come back in an hour's time." This I did, and the same process was again repeated, and again. When I came to him at the end of the third hour Mr. Black burst into tears, saying: "My God! It is all gone from me! All these years I have accepted the kindness of these good people in the belief that I could partly repay it with this, my only legacy. Daniel, there are ten or twelve processes through which I put my knives—but I cannot now remember even one of them. A few hours ago, when I told you to get the writing materials, everything was fresh in my mind. Now it has flown. I have put it off too long!"

I looked at Mr. Black in awe and wonder. His forehead was raw and bleeding, where the skin and flesh had been rubbed off by his fingers. His sightless eyes were filled with tears, and his face expressed utter grief and despair. I could only say: "Never mind, Mr. Black. It is all in the wisdom of God. He knows best; and undoubtedly He had His reasons for allowing the secret of the Bowie-Knife to remain with you."

The inventor of the Bowie-Knife lived with me slightly more than two years following this scene—but from that moment he was a hopeless imbecile. The struggle to impart the secret had destroyed his mind. God gave him the secret for His own purposes, but was unwilling for him to impart it to others.

The grave of James Black is in the old cemetery on the northern edge of Washington, Arkansas. This cemetery has been unused since pioneer days; and, since the grave-markers were of wood and have long since rotted away, no one can today point out the last resting place of the inventor of the Bowie-Knife.⁴

⁴ Letter to the author from W. H. Etter, editor of the *Washington Telegraph*, and mayor of Washington, Arkansas—dated July 21, 1941.

4. BOWIE-KNIVES AND “BOWIE-KNIVES”

JAMES BLACK BEFORE his blindness, made hundreds of Knives “like Bowie’s” in design and temper of steel. For that blade, “single-edged to the curve of the point, where both sides had been keened to a razor-edge,” had won immediate fame in Bowie’s hands; and Black’s succeeding patrons spread word—and blood—most efficiently. The following section will deal with that word and that blood, over their thirty-year heyday; the present short chapter, as preliminary, concerns itself only with steel: with those weapons, like or unlike Bowie’s, which a rapt public called by Bowie’s name.

We have, first, the original BOWIE-KNIFE, as made by the silversmith Black from his own specifications, and accepted by James Bowie as the weapon *par excellence*.

Second, there were those Knives manufactured by Black from the same or a closely similar model in similar steel, for those desiring Knives “made like Bowie’s.” These may be classified as genuine Bowie-Knives.

In a third category are the Bowie-knives manufactured—usually in Sheffield and Birmingham, England—on more or less the same pattern as the original; these constituted the bulk of “the Bowie-knife trade.” But the “trade” also included a weapon made on an altogether different pattern nearly as popular and often confused with the Bowie-Knife: the *Arkansas Toothpick*. This companion weapon also originated with Black.

Finally, there are the motley “bowie-knives” which bore only the vaguest resemblance, aside from the name, to the genuine Bowie. These were of innumerable types, weights, sizes, and materials, and constituted a bulky por-

tion of the stock-in-trade of the dime-novelist. Not that the knives misnamed were all fraudulent imitations; if the public wished to call all knives "Bowie" that were sufficiently murderous, who were the cutlers to object? We should remember that Black himself made many knives unlike Bowie's—and yet for the same general purpose. He made knives without handle-guards, knives much smaller than the Bowie, fashioned to the particular desires of individual customers.

Bowie's Knife, unlike the "butcher knife" Bowie used on Vidalia Sandbar, was not a hunting knife, but instead a weapon devised for the sole purpose of knife-fighting. "Big Jim" Bowie was a knife-fighter, amply experienced to recognize at once the virtues of the Knife. His earlier experience, including the Sandbar battle and other difficulties, had taught him the efficacy of a good knife in close fighting, and brought him, quite logically, to the door of the West's best blacksmith.

There are many clear descriptions of the original Bowie-Knife and its authentic copies. But it will be observed that no writer can write of the Bowie's appearance without a little reminiscing, perhaps a little moralizing, certainly considerable emphasis on awe and function—without, in brief, considerable description of the writer's own complex of emotions concerning the Knife. Some must be quoted verbatim.

John Palette, whom the author knew before his death (1925) as a resident of New Orleans, stated regarding the Bowie-Knife:

In 1853 I lived on a plantation near Port Gibson, Mississippi. At that time most men wore knives and pistols as commonly as we of today wear hats. Bowie-knives were not uncommon, and

I owned one in which I took especial pride. This knife came to me through a horse trade with a man named Emory, who had been an overseer on the Buzzard¹ plantation in western Arkansas. When I received the knife I was told that it was made by an Arkansas blacksmith "who made the best blades in the world." I do not recall his name, but I can describe the knife. The blade was fourteen inches long, single-edged to the curve of the point, where both sides had been keened to a razor-edge. The curve started about two and one-half inches from the point. On the back or rib of the blade there was a fighting guard of hardened brass. It was covered with nicks, showing that Emory or a former owner had engaged in fights with the weapon. The back piece was used in parrying blows.

Hardened brass is a much softer metal than tempered steel, and the parrying guard was made of the softer metal in order to catch and hold a blow, otherwise the blade would slide and cut the holder, who naturally would be on the defensive. Whenever you see a knife with a strip along the back of the blade, you may be sure that the weapon was made for killing men, and not beasts of the field.

The hilt of this knife was protected by a two-pronged cross-guard, the overall length of the latter being about three inches. Others I have seen were even longer. The blade was one and seven-eighths inches wide at the guard, and the heel or rib of the blade was three-eighths inch in breadth. The handle of this weapon was made of seasoned black walnut, and was made in one piece into which the shank of the blade had been sunk, the latter being pawled or knobbed at its end.

It was practically impossible to test the edge of the blade by the "wet-thumb" method without cutting one's flesh. When the tip of the blade was "twanged" with the thumb it produced a clear, bell-like sound. Once, when I was dismounting from my horse, I accidentally caught the point of the blade in a wooden

¹ Possibly the Buzzard brothers who had befriended Black.

stirrup, and the knife was flipped about thirty feet and stuck up in the earth. The sound thus produced was still present when I picked up the knife and held it to my ear.

I knew a knife-fighter from Mississippi who used an Arkansas Toothpick. It had a sixteen-inch blade, double-edged and tapered to a "toothpick" point. He used it as a throwing knife; said he had killed two men with it. [But sixteen inches was nothing remarkable; an English "official report" describes a knife "manufactured by Bunting and Son, of Sheffield, the blade of which was eighteen inches long, ornamented in beautiful tracery, and worded 'The Genuine Arkansas Toothpick.'" And a twenty-three-inch blade will appear later herein.]

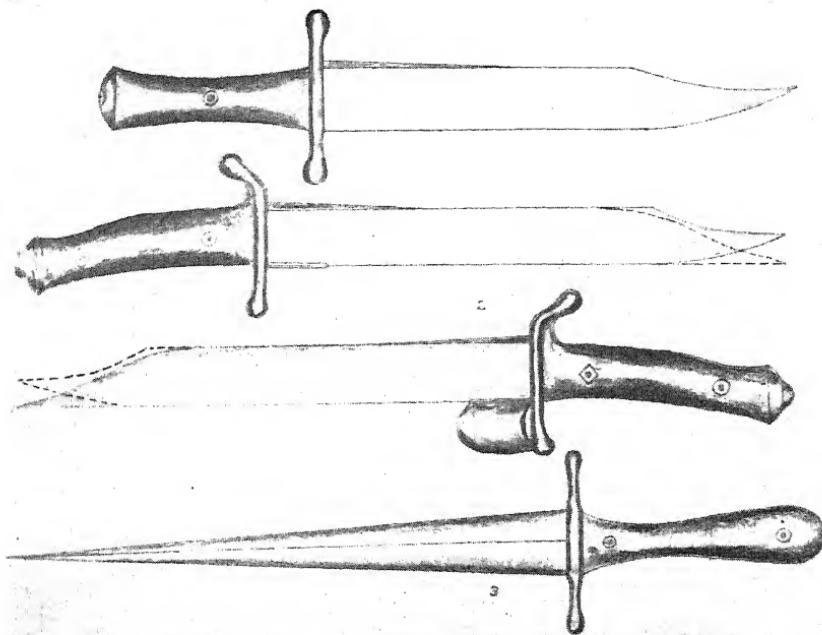
The tales of Bowie's purported prodigality in giving away knives—usually it was "the original Bowie-Knife"—are numberless. One reads² that "the knife used by Edwin Forrest in the stage play *Metamora* was the original *Bowie-Knife*, presented to the actor by Bowie when the former visited him at his plantation." And again, in the same publication a year later:

There is a gentleman in this city who has in his possession a knife once owned by Jim Bowie, which was given him by Juan Padillo, a man who left the LaFitte band of pirates to follow the fortunes of Bowie, and who is still living. The knife is of tempered steel, the blade sixteen inches long, with a steel guard and buckhorn handle. The handle is dressed smooth where the hand clasps it, and on one side is a silver plate one and one-half inches long, set into the handle, on which is scratched, in rude characters, "Jim Bowie." On the steel guard of the knife, on the upper side, two notches have been cut with a file, which old Juan Padillo said were cut to mark the number of men Bowie

² In *American Notes and Queries*, June 2, 1888 (I, 5) 49, 50, quoting Durand's *History of the Philadelphia Stage*. Following paragraph from issue of March 23, 1889 (II, 21) 251.



JAMES BOWIE, whose every appearance attracted huge crowds wanting to see the man whose name carried more weight in the Southwest than that of the President of the United States



BOWIE-KNIVES—Number One: Usual type of Bowie-Knife as used in the Civil War. Note fighting guard on back of blade. Number Two: (Obverse and reverse) Fighting knife with thumb guard, made with varied points as illustrated. The straight blade in bottom illustration represents, as nearly as descriptions can convey, the type of knife used in the Sandbar Battle. Number Three: Arkansas Tooth Pick, usually worn in holster at back of neck, from which position is was drawn or thrown

had killed with the weapon. On the lower side of the guard are three notches, which are said to represent the number of Indians scalped with the knife. The knife was given by Bowie to Padillo while the former was a resident of San Augustine, Texas; and was presented by Padillo to its present owner in 1862, when the latter succeeded in recovering from the Comanches ten head of horses, which they had stolen from Padillo's ranch, thirty-five miles west of San Antonio.

There is no question concerning Bowie's having owned several knives during his lifetime, and the evidence affirms that he used knives in deadly affrays long before Black made the "original" Bowie-Knife for him. Numerous very common types of knives have been exhibited as the original Bowie-Knife by persons anxious for publicity, but the weapon was, as Crockett related, cremated with Bowie at the Alamo.

One wonders what has become of the thousands of "British-made Bowie-Knives" which were manufactured and shipped into this country to stock the shelves of dealers. A British official writes how he was offered a British-made knife at no advance in price—so the vendor asserted—though "he could assure him that it had tasted blood."³ And an English traveler thus describes, presumably for an English audience, the following barbaric weapons—only at the last admitting that weapons too are English:

... I never fully realized the great debt the human species owes the dead hero (James Bowie) till I had scientifically discussed the invention by which he acquired his immortality in a

³ *British Correspondence Concerning Texas*, quoted in *Barbados Quarterly*, July 12, 1840. Following report is from *Temple Bar Magazine*, April, 1861 (II), 120-130.

cutler's shop, or "store," as the Americans call it, in the city of Richmond, state of Virginia.

Desirous to possess myself of the "young man's best companion" in a wild country, a good Bowie-Knife, I that day entered about noon the shop of Hiram Peabody, in High street. I had long since found that nearly everyone I met carried, or "toted," as they phrase it, either a Bowie-Knife or a five-shooter . . . So at last I gave way to the repeated urgings of prudence and, entering Peabody's shop, asked to look at some of his best Bowie-Knives.

"Take a seat, Mister," said Hiram, blandly, "and I'll look out for the sort of Bowie I think you would like to tote . . . Hannibal, get down that A4 case from the third shelf." [Hannibal] got up and brought me the case of knives.

Imagine a rather short and broad carving knife, with a buck-horn handle and a dagger hilt of the ordinary cross-form. But, reshaping it on the forge of your fancy, do not leave it a thin polished slip of steel so high-tempered and brittle that it would snap like glass if you pried open with it the lid of a jewel-box, or dabbed it with an oblique stab into the soft deal of a kitchen dresser; but rather, weld two or three such knives together until you have a backbone to it massive as that of a woodsman's billhook; so that, if camping out in the woods, you could lop in two with it at a single stroke the aromatic boughs of the red cypress . . . and cleave in two like carrots young hickory or maple saplings as thick as your wrist.

The first weapon Hiram handed to me was *double-edged towards the point*, which did not resemble that of a spearhead, but rather that of a Turkish scimitar, or a crusader's falchion, the type of which our armourers probably derived from the East. It was a weapon with which to cleave open a bear's head, to slit open an alligator or break up a dead deer.

. . . In weight it was heavier than the heaviest Oriental handjar or poniard, and in its whole character it strongly re-

minded me of the short heavy Roman gladium. At my objection that it was too heavy, Hiram solemnly said: "It is a mere toothpick to the Bowie a Missouri gentleman—who was in here yesterday to buy a revolver—toted with him." Then, as a finality: "Colonel Augustus Twiggs, who led on the Palmetto Regiment at the battle of Chapultepec in the Mexican War, bought his Bowie-Knife in this identical store!"

We fell into conversation about Bowie-Knives in general, and the various attempts to improve them for close conflict, in which they had been found so deadly. The most ingenious of these was one in which the back of the knife was hollowed and partly filled with quicksilver. This fluid of course fell to the handle when the knife was raised, and when it struck ran down towards the point, weighting it at the end and giving greater impetus to the blow. I observed that this idea was not original—since medieval armourers attached a running weight to their two-handed swords, known as *steel-apple*.⁴

At this Peabody spat twice, took a fresh chew, withered me with a look, and stated that most of the best Bowie-knives came from Sheffield, and that after some of the Mexican battles, the "Greasers" who had fallen by the Bowie-Knife were found with their skulls cloven almost to the teeth.

There is one point concerning a genuine Bowie-Knife that allows of no controversy. The dreaded blade had the inevitable cross-guard. Ordinary cutting and skinning knives as made by Black, while possessing most of the

⁴ This writer had evidently heard of the Hollow Sword Blade Company. This organization, which existed in London up to the time of the revolution of 1688, manufactured sword blades with running mercury in their backs. When a blow was struck with one of these swords, the quicksilver gravitated to that point, thus increasing the momentum of the blow. This idea was evolved from the medieval steel-apple, which was a weight made to slide in a groove on the back of the blade for the same purpose. The Hollow Sword Blade Company later went into the real estate business, buying up defaulted Irish estates, with the result that many of these to the present day rest upon the Sword Blade title.

good qualities of the Bowie, were in all instances minus the guard. There are several such knives known to be in existence. They were made to be used as tools; but the Bowie-Knife was a weapon.

For here was an instrument adapted to knife-fighting as an art. Unfortunately, literature has in the past erroneously represented the knife-fighter as casual, blood-thirsty, drawing his weapon in the darkness of night against his unsuspecting victim—with an amateur's over-hand stroke. Whereas in truth, in the era of the Bowie-Knife, men who desired to master their weapon went to school.

There were Bowie-Knife schools in all major cities of the Southwest, from St. Louis to New Orleans. The matter was serious; Knifeman must study to merit his Knife. The skill of professionals was indeed such that sometimes they could fight for hours, each trying his best to reach some vital spot with his knife—all in vain, all without drawing blood. A patron of one of these schools of cutting and slicing related:⁵

I had taken regular lessons in the knife school in St. Louis, where once I saw two Frenchmen fight for half an hour with Bowie-knives—cut and parry—and all the harm done was, that one of them lost his little finger by a clean slash, and the other bit the first man's thumb off, after first missing gouging him. I have been in fusses at San Antonio among the Greasers, when the clicking of knives sounded like winding up clocks. (The same writer added:) I'd rather be pistoled than cut—ten times over.

And perfect weapon and finest skill were devoted to real purpose: a fight with Bowie-Knives between enemies,

⁵ *All the Year Round*, May 25, 1861 (V, 109), 207, 208.

when it did not result in the death of one or the other, was inevitably resumed later—until the formally required end was attained. When Americans fought duels, they struck to kill. Godley, in his *Letters from America*, comments:

Some noted duellists were pointed out at the Saratoga Springs, and some atrocious anecdotes are related. It is thought a virtue in American duels that they always mean real business, and are not those caricatures of a barbarous custom which, in nine cases out of ten, serve to appease wounded honor in England. . . .

The U. S. Secretary of the Navy told a young officer who protested against duelling restrictions that he didn't care how much the men duelled, just so they didn't kill citizens.

Curiously enough, writers have always described, and artists have always pictured, knife fights as conditioned against all the rules of common sense. Almost invariably the illustrations and text alike of not only "penny dreadfuls" but literary works of distinction have represented the hero as dealing death with an *overhand* stroke.

But about that overhand stroke. Certainly none but the veriest amateur has ever left his guard wide open by raising his knife above his head. The seasoned knife-duelist was aware that to lift his weapon too high was "to sign his own death warrant."

The stance of a right-handed knife-fighter is properly as follows: Knife in hand, left foot slightly forward, head set well back. The knife is usually held sidewise in the hand, thumb alongside the blade, just beyond the guard. The fighter is now in position to deliver a slashing, side-wise blow, or a ripping uppercut. The head is never a target for the professional knife-fighter; his possible bullseye is encompassed in that space between the throat and hips. A study of many hundreds of recorded knife-

fights, and verbal accounts by survivors, reveals the fact that the death blow is, nine times out of ten, delivered to the torso. Exceptions are recorded in the duels of amateurs, and occasionally of experts facing unorthodox opponents.

As the art flourished, so did the makers of knives, all of which must be sold as "Bowies." The author has handled probably a gross of "western bowies" of various types, making wide acquaintance among pioneers and relicts of border feuds, and western men in general. One of those questioned regarding the so-called "Texas Bowie" was Charley Siringo, author of *A Lone Star Cowboy*, *A Cowboy Detective*, and numerous other books reciting his experiences throughout the West when it was "wild and woolly."

Siringo mentioned a big knife which was owned by Shanghai Pearce, biggest cattleman in the West, with 100,000 longhorns on his *Rancho Grande*.

"I have often seen Pearce honing his big knife on his bootleg," said Siringo. "The blade was about fourteen inches long, double-edged, and tapering to a point. The knife could cut a *reata* dangling in the air. It was a throwing knife. Pearce showed me the proper manner in which to test a throwing blade. He rested the back of the blade on the forefinger at a certain point according to the total length of the weapon. You see, the smith who makes such a blade distributes the weight of his steel according to the throwing range. Pearce's knife was machined to turn twice in a throwing range of thirty feet."

Each frontier cutler used his own inventive powers on "bowies," with nondescript results. A famous type of knife used in the old West was that known as "Green

River." This was made at the famous Green River works, and was a favorite of the "free white American" trappers, the latter being distinguished thus to segregate them from the "low-down boughten Frenchies" of the Hudson's Bay Company. The trade mark, on the nine- or ten-inch blade near the handle, accounts for the expression noted frequently in early Rocky Mountain narratives—"shoving her clear up to old Green River."

Mountain Men used the "Mexican Bowie," manufactured in old Taos. One of these knives was used by Al Parker, "The San Juan Man-Eater," so named because he killed his five companions in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado and lived off their flesh for weeks. Parker's knife has been personally examined by the author in the Colorado State Museum at Denver. It is the only knife in existence known to have been used by an American cannibal.

Makers of "bowie-knives" swarmed into the plains country of the West during the great buffalo-slaughtering era of the 1870's. The knife-trade flourished, with more than ten thousand hunters turning over to the "skimmers" tens of thousands of animals at a time. These "wandering blacksmiths" carried portable forges and used buffalo chips for fuel. The chips, fanned by a hand bellows, threw out an intense heat; but, as the oldsters say: "It taken two men and a boy to feed the fire" with the feather-weight fuel.

Bear knives, skinning knives, scalping knives—and most of them called "bowies"—all the known and some unknown types of blades were turned out with equal facility by the frontier knifemakers. Many of the knives were of wicked appearance, but the quality was haphazard. De-

spite the maker's lack of skill, however, the weapons furnished the inspiration for the countless "dime novels" of Prentiss Ingraham and other highly imaginative New Yorkers.

A clipping which came to hand some time ago concerns a "genuine Bowie-Knife owned by an Arkansas attorney." The knife, as pictured in the article, has a curved blade and is minus the guard. It has presumably been traced to Black. If made by him, it was one of his earlier models, antedating the Bowie.

The fact that Black made knives according to various patterns and used for diverse purposes has already been well established. One such knife is No. 2 in illustration facing page 33. It was owned before the first world war by William Berry of Russellville, Arkansas, who showed it to the author. Mr. Berry had a varied collection of knives. The illustration shows the weapon in obverse and reverse. The owner stated that it was used as a fighting weapon and was one of two variations, as shown in the blade-points. It has one peculiarity not present in any other type of knife—the "thumb guard." This guard, as shown, consists of a hinged cup which folds either way and allows thumb protection for either a right- or left-handed wielder. (The thumb, being the most advanced portion of the body in knife duels between experts, was frequently severed.)

. The popularity of the "bowie-knife" did not die out completely following the settling of vast areas of the West. Circus roustabouts carried "bowies" as late as the turn of the century. Some of the earlier medicine shows featured knife-throwers, who were usually introduced to the audiences as "experts in the handling of

the Bowie-Knife." My old friend, the late Pawnee Bill, of Oklahoma, was a celebrated knife-thrower, and performed in the Buffalo Bill-Pawnee Bill Wild West Show. Such knives as he showed me, far from being Bowies, were made for marksmanship tests only, and were not weapons in any sense. They were tempered for only three inches back from the point.

In summary, the types of blades known as "bowies" during the nineteenth century can be classified as follows:

- (1) *The Knife, or Original Bowie*, made by James Black for the personal use of James Bowie.
- (2) *Bowie-Knives*, manufactured by Black from the same pattern as the above for those who wanted knives "made like Bowie's."
- (3) *Bowie-knives*, as manufactured wholesale for the "trade" by firms in England.
- (4) *Arkansas Toothpicks*, throwing knives undoubtedly originated by Black, probably shortly after the Bowie. They were manufactured in England and shipped to this country along with Bowie-knives, by which title they were sometimes known.
- (5) *Bowie-knives*, closely patterned after the genuine, also manufactured in England for use in our Civil War.
- (6) *bowie-knives*, as used by the border outlaws and the house-burners of Lane, Montgomery, and Jennison; made from such materials as were at hand.
- (7) *bowie-knives*, haphazard types used throughout the West in the buffalo-killing era.

- (8) *bowie-knives*, used by professional knife-throwers in the show business.
- (9) *bowie-knives*, any type of hunting knives with guards.

A quantity of knives, a flashing, searing, deathly horde. One remembers Thomas W. Knox's Denver judge: "Out of his rosy face and unkempt beard protruded a clay pipe, and around his waist was a belt, holding full in view an enormous bowie-knife and Navy Revolver." And in the same moment we remember Knox's imperative:⁶

But stop. Before we enter the city of the living, let us glance at the city of the dead. The cemetery is two miles east of Denver, approaching the city. Nine-elevenths of those lying here met violent deaths. They are the victims of the revolver and the *bowie-knife*.

⁶ In *To Pike's Peak and Denver*. Reviewed in *Knickerbocker Magazine*, August, 1861 (LVIII, 2), 120-127.

2 BLOOD AND LEGENDS OF BLOOD



5. THE KNIFE AT WORK

AARON BURR, DYING on Staten Island after years of poverty and shame, had a very special interest in the West, and in its new tradition of blood. "You see!" he cried, after hearing of San Jacinto, "I was right! I was only thirty years too soon: What was treason in me thirty years ago is patriotism now!" ^a

Word of the Knife spread fast, and fearfully; 110 years ago it could be said that "Among the many means invented for man's destruction, the Bowie-Knife is the most effective in execution, the most fearful to the sight and imagination."¹ For as Knife was suited to first user

^a Robert M. McElroy, *Winning of the Far West*, 26.

¹ "P. Q." writing in the *Baltimore Commercial Transcript*, June 9, 1838 (V), 78, 79. Quoted at length in Section III, Chapter 10.

and first user to Knife, so was all an era ready to celebrate itself by so wonderfully quick, so sure, so wonderfully horrible a symbol. East and West alike were fascinated by national growth, and individual might, and by very death where life had come to mean self-assertion. The press fed, naturally, the public fever; no doubt the popularity of the Knife was due in large part to an active if somewhat erratic journalism. (In Mississippi, in 1839, publisher John J. Hamilton found some advantage in changing the name of his paper, *The Grenada Bulletin*, to *The Bowie-Knife*.)

When the general public first learned of the terrible new blade, in 1836, blood was spilling throughout our western wilderness. Human life was "cheap as the turn of a card." The most fearful duels and murders were commonplace events. Or such was public belief, and public wish to believe.

The "roaring forties" were already well announced; the greatest horde of pioneers ever to plunge into wilderness was already on its way. The Mississippi and its tributaries were crowded with great steamers, loaded to the gunwales with oversize cargoes of English and German immigrants, headed for riches in Missouri and points west. And from all the East they came: white or black sheep of "oldest families," together with first generation immigrants; those whose fathers had moved past earlier frontiers, those who themselves had migrated earlier and were now dissatisfied to be overtaken once more by civilization, and those others never before tempted from the cities, yet now ready for hardship: native-born *iron men* on the trail blazed only a short time before by Davy Crockett and his kind. There were the staunch Ken-

tuckians, moving like Boone from "cramped quarters," the bold, wiry Tennesseans looking for new "b'ar kentry," and the assorted gamblers, desperados, highwaymen, and river pirates of Natchez, Vicksburg, Cincinnati, and other river points, allowed "one hour to get out of sight, and until eternity to stay out." Across the Mississippi! The words were fire and destiny, strength, freedom, drink, and blood.

Untrammeled by laws and customs of thickly settled communities, Texas held out open arms to all who would come. It offered a wild free life and boundless opportunities. There lay fruits to be garnered only by those "sound on the goose." For after the fall of the Alamo, and subsequent Texan victory at San Jacinto, Texas had become more than mere land of riches. It was symbol, and the symbol had a name. The name was James Bowie, a name spoken more than Travis, or Crockett, or even Sam Houston, on every street corner in every American city; a name dwelt on with pride in every backwoods outpost from Ohio to the Rockies.

James Bowie was dead, of course, dead at the Alamo. But his death seemed only to immortalize the legend, to symbolize forever the American fighting man. Men who had known Bowie in life exulted in such honor, and the editors and publishers were not slow to print each likely morsel, probable or improbable, which concerned the hero and his Knife. Use of the Knife? Why, heroic yet everyday!

Bullies brawled with Bowie-knives throughout the country. But the weapon, far from being confined to such shady use, was the favorite companion of men high in public life. Senators, governors, and their lessers bristled

alike with steel, and fought at the drop of a hat or hint. A man's honor was accounted sacred, yet somehow destroyed by the least—unanswered—insult; and the insult, whether spoken, written, whispered, or fancied, must bring recourse to weapons. Old quarrels were renewed and brought to their now fashionable, but deadly, culminations. Where there was hate, Bowie-knives flashed. The blood of the participants ran in gory streams, and thickened in the dust of the roadways.

The first known printed reference to the Bowie-Knife is already typical:²

A Spaniard and a Frenchman, who have long been accustomed to trapping in the mountains, arrived at this place (Xenia, Ohio) recently and went out to settle an affair of honor. The spot selected for the duel was an open square in the suburbs of the city. When both parties were ready and stripped for the occasion, with their two large *Bowie-knives* (which are instruments about twelve inches in length, an inch and a quarter wide at the hilt, double-edged and tapering to sharp points) and the word "ready" was given, both rushed to the contest. After parrying and plunging and guarding some half-minute, the Frenchman made a strike at his opponent and succeeded in cutting open the latter's abdomen, so as to let out all the bowels. At the same moment the Spaniard plunged his Bowie about ten inches deep into the breast of his antagonist, who immediately yielded up the ghost with a deep groan. The Spaniard survived for some hours. The duel served the spectators with a lively subject for discussion, as to which fighter showed the most coolness, and who parried thrusts with the most skill; in short, which showed the most sleight in killing his fellow man.

Thus, in June, the *Niles Register* had introduced the

² *Niles Register*, June 4, 1836 (L, 14: 4th Ser. v. 14), 234.

Bowie-Knife to its readers. Not, to be sure, with any idea that those readers would be more disturbed by vivid detail than by lurid style. Rather, the item is provided as frankest item "for discussion," no compassion being probable for the anonymous Spaniard and Frenchman. But consider the *Register's* naivete: The Bowie is named, but the description fits, instead, the "Arkansas Toothpick." This in June, 1836!

By December the *Register* knew the Knife better:³

The public prints in all sections of the country are teeming with accounts of the most revolting murders and attempts at murder. In Philadelphia, between Saturday and Monday last, no less than four attempts at murder with deadly weapons were made. In Natchez, a meeting has been held to suppress street duelling, and in most of the cities the Bowie-Knife and pistol are daily used as a means of vengeance, or to arrest the hand of justice.

The *Register* had not, it would appear, any idea that the very outburst of Knife news in "the public prints" may have helped spread the fever. Nor, however nauseous he regarded such news, did the editor cease to print the most unremarkable items, just so long as they concerned the Bowie-Knife.⁴ No matter how dry the reporting: "Two lads fought at Louisville, a few days since, with Bowie-Knives. One of them died in a few minutes after being stabbed." No matter how melodramatic: each killer must be described as seizing or grasping his Knife, sending it the most carefully-measured number of inches, hilt-deep

3 *Niles Register*, December 24, 1836 (LI, 1317), 272.

4 Following illustrations all from *Niles Register*: "lads at Louisville" and panther story—April 29, 1837 (LII, 1335), 144 and 3; clippings from *Argus and Observer*—November 10, 1838 (LV, 1415), 163, and March 16, 1839 (LVI, 3; 5th Ser. v. 6), 36.

into the breast of his victim, who in turn must be careful to sink back, or to the ground, preferably with a groan but in any event lifeless. Animals too are dealt with in the same pattern: The crew of a keel-boat being "seated in the cabin, a large panther sprang in and seized one of the men." When a rifle then missed fire (as in all proper Knife stories), a Bowie-Knife was "obtained" and "plunged into the heart of the beast."

But the fever for Knife material is not to be satisfied by the correspondents of one paper alone. Sometimes with credit, sometimes without, the papers of the day borrowed tirelessly. By exhibitions of alternate blood and editorial dismay, each publisher could retail, as most moral instruction, each fellow editor's choicest bits. Again the *Niles Register*, quoting from the *Columbus (Mississippi) Argus*:

We are infested with a numerous gang of professional "sportsmen," or, in common parlance, gamblers, who put law, gospel, and everything pertaining to good order at defiance. On Thursday and Friday last, the military were called out to assist the civil officers in preserving the peace of the city, and to prevent the wanton shedding of blood. Good Heavens! Has our beautiful and once boasted moral and religious city come to this? Are soldiers with loaded muskets and bristling bayonets required to protect us as if we were in a besieged city? Cannot our wives and daughters traverse our streets without meeting street fighters, armed with double-barrelled guns, pistols, and Bowie-Knives, at every corner?

And, reprinted from the *Morgan (Alabama) Observer*:

Last Saturday a stranger, an emigrant, driving westward through Florence with a small herd of sheep, a cow or two, and a wife and three little children, was murdered. A citizen of



JEAN LAFITTE, famous pirate of Barataria,
who was well acquainted with the Bowie brothers



ARKANSAS TROOPS in the Civil War, showing the Bowie-Knife bayonets which they used

Florence rode into his little herd, scattered it, and, upon being reprimanded, got off his horse and went into a store. He soon reappeared with a gun, shot the stranger, and as the latter, sorely wounded, tried to get into a house nearby, his assailant overtook him and stabbed him to the heart with a Bowie-Knife.

In the summer of 1838, an Arkansas traveler, William Bailey, recorded some not too impersonal impressions. What he published in London two years later (as *A Voyage on Horseback through Southern North America*) is written in what seems to have been amazement or disbelief. Despite the ease with which Europe then accepted the most exaggerated accounts of the United States, one can only conclude that Bailey hardly knew himself whether to understand his adventures as commonplace or perhaps as somehow merely imagined. He had rather an uneasy time:

Heavy travel dominated all the roads and bypaths. The villages were full of travelers, all seemingly intent upon important business. It was only infrequently that one could obtain a bed for the night at a tavern, and even then he sometimes had to share it with three or four other late arrivals. One night I had occasion to stop at a frequently visited tavern and as I arrived somewhat earlier than most people put up for the night, I was fortunate enough to secure a room to myself.

Shortly after putting out the light, however, and before I could compose myself for sleep, there was a loud scraping of feet and thumping at the door, followed by its being thrown open. There at the door stood the landlord, buttressed on each side by an elegant-looking gentleman.

Despite my vociferous protests, the men were to share the room with me; they were state senators, and I found it necessary to "knock under." They did not disrobe, but each divested himself of a long black coat, checked vest and standing collar. They

fairly bristled with weapons; each had two enormous *Bowie-knives* in his belt which were at least fifteen inches in length, and a brace of pistols. My relief was unbounded when they sweepingly disclaimed any intention of sharing the bed; on the contrary, they spread their coats on the floor and lay upon them.

[t was the following night that really upset Bailey:

I stopped at a hotel which had both sleeping and eating accommodations. The eating part was unsurpassed by anything I had ever encountered, but the sleeping was all done on the floor.

There were two large rooms, and when everyone retired, each person made his own bed by taking off his coat, rolling it up, and, after lying flat on his back, placing it beneath his head.

There were at least thirty persons in each room, and it was midnight before the candles were snuffed and the last one lay down. But lying down did not mean sleeping. There was a constant uproar in the room where I lay. Most of the company were young fellows, from fourteen years of age, up to twenty. Every one of them was armed with at least one Bowie-Knife and a pistol, and there was a constant string of profanity loosed, owing to their having rolled upon these weapons. Those who were in the other room were older men, and consequently more sedate, and as the uproar continued on our side, one of them called out, that if one certain lad (who was very loud and obscene, and lay next to me) did not shut up his mouth and go to sleep he, the complainant, would "come in there and shut it for him." This produced an even louder uproar, ending when the lad sat up suddenly, and with a pistol in his hand ready-cocked, dared the other to show his face at the connecting door of the rooms.

"Oh, so you'll come in and shut me up, will you?" he cried. "Well, by God, I'd like to see you do that, you old graybeard. I just dare you to show your head at that door, you God-dambed _____! I'll blow you to hell and back quicker'n a possum can skin a cottonwood, that I will; and I'll be God-dambed if I won't!"

The fellow in the other room muttered a little and then said: "Oh, you are nothing but a suckle-brat; go on to sleep!" At this crowning insult the youth picked up his large Bowie-Knife which lay on the floor, and hitting it against his pistol-barrel, again cried out: "A suckle-brat, am I? Well, you old _____, how do you like the sound of these tools? I'll give you your choice and the first try, Bowie or pistol. What do you say, God-damn you?" He cocked his ear in a listening attitude and kept his eyes on the door, as if expecting an immediate acceptance. But the bellicose individual beyond the portal had evidently "shut up" for the night; there was a sound of loud snoring, and with a shouted "God-damned if I don't settle his vittles in the morning—I'll be double-damned if I don't!" the lad lay down again, grumbling. I could not sleep for more than an hour following this interchange, but kept my eyes on the black void of the door, expecting every moment to see a creeping figure, Bowie-Knife in hand, bent upon vengeance. But nothing happened, and the lad lay at my side, and, having vindicated his honor, snored loud and contentedly undisturbed by fears or dreams.

It is unfortunate for literature, that the impressionable English traveler could not have seen and described General Sam Houston's entrance into the theatre, in the city named for him. The elegance of the guests already arrived, the reassuring scrape of the orchestra beforehand, must surely have provided for Bailey first some comfortable sense of recognition—then final, utter confusion. For the "peal of three cheers (proclaiming) the arrival of Houston and his suite," the hissing of coattails, "the discharge of pistols, and the glistening of Bowie-knives"—surely Bailey could explain such, within his own experience, only as comic opera.⁵

5 Scene described by Colonel Edward Stiff, *Texan Emigrant*, 72.

Bailey did sense quickly the general delight in the new weapons, and the pleasure taken in routine abuse of neighbors. He seems, however, not to have observed the general concern to work out as many variations of the sport as possible: Use of the Knife while on one's back, proper underhand technique, saw pit duels, and the special problems posed when the contestants chained themselves to a log, or held opposite corners of a handkerchief, or were even bound securely right arm to right arm—an arrangement attributed (falsely) to the great Bowie himself.

For those of great name, as well as the little-known fought with their Bowies by any rule improvised for the occasion. For example (as reported by many sources, including *Harper's* for August, 1868) :

In the summer of 1838 George Schuyler, a grandson of the famous General Philip Schuyler, was traveling through Mississippi. At Port Gibson, while awaiting the next stage southward, Schuyler was the center of a boisterous crowd in the town's leading tavern. Suddenly, as all drank and made merry, the door was thrown violently open. He who thus prepared his entry was one Gamble, a notorious outlaw and murderer feared by all. Swagging up to the crowd, he demanded to know "what all the noise was about."

Schuyler, who thought that perhaps he and his new acquaintances were disturbing a rule of the hotel, looked at the newcomer and asked if "he were the landlord." The desperado, stricken almost speechless by the "audacity" of the stranger, spat directly in Schuyler's face. The latter promptly knocked the outlaw to the floor.

The real landlord, fearful whether of deaths or dam-

age, now pushed to the fore, suggesting that the two men be locked together in a dark room, each armed with a pistol and a Bowie-Knife, and there settle their affair without molestation of others. Both parties readily agreeing to this arrangement (which was an old custom thereabouts), the owner conducted them to a room on the second floor. The blinds being closely drawn, and the men having inspected their weapons, the door was closed on them; the crowd remained in the hall, with the landlord.

For some moments there was no sound from the room. Then came the report of a pistol, followed by a scuffling noise, another pistol shot; afterwards was only prolonged and deathly silence.

The landlord called and, receiving no reply, unlocked and opened the door. The crowd pushed forward into the room, fully expecting to see Gamble crouched over his victim. Instead, they found Gamble lifeless; Schuyler, sore wounded, groaned softly in a corner. It developed that Gamble had fired first, the shot entering Schuyler's chest and knocking him down. Schuyler's shot had gone wild. But, as Gamble stood over him to deliver a finishing blow, Schuyler reached upward and "at a single stroke disemboweled" the outlaw with his Bowie-Knife. Schuyler said:

"I had decided to rely upon the strategy of James Bowie, as I had heard it related upon more than one occasion."

So certain, indeed, was the Bowie-Knife to appear in a quarrel that the great anxiety of each disputant seemed to turn upon striking the first blow. "So much so is this the case," stated an English writer, "that in a violent

argument with a Memphis or Vicksburg man, it would be unsafe to scratch the back of your neck, for it is down the back that the Bowie-Knife is often kept."

The same writer quoted "an Irish-American gentleman" as having informed him that "Only the *lowest of the low* use their fists, we hold it *brutal* to use the fist!"⁶

But the rowdies of 1861 had as predecessors in the national turmoil many legislators and statesmen:⁷

Jackson, January 9, 1840
Thursday night

A disgraceful scene occurred this afternoon near the door of the representatives hall, while the House was in session, which has caused somewhat of a sensation. Mr. Thomas Kearney of Clinton was roughly assaulted by ex-Governor Runnels, on account of some queries published a few weeks since in the *Mississippian*, in relation to the management of the Union Bank, of which queries Mr. K. was the reputed author. I am informed that Governor Runnels, who was himself armed with pistols and a Bowie-Knife, told Mr. Kearney to go and arm himself preparatory to a street fight. Mr. Kearney did prepare himself, but was arrested and held to bail; Governor R., I am told, bid defiance to the sheriff. I am also informed that one of the members of the house of representatives took part in this discreditable fracas. Public opinion, it is to be hoped, will frown down all such conduct, as tending to produce dishonor on the state.

There is apparent change in the tone of later news stories concerning the Knife. Where Bowie becomes the story's hero for his first use of the Knife against three, it later is taken for granted that a competent killer, in

⁶ *Temple Bar Magazine*, April, 1861 (II), 120-130.

⁷ *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Daily Gazette*, January 13, 1840 (III, 10), 2.

reasonably strategic circumstances, can take on nearly any number without necessarily playing underdog for the reader's sympathy. Again and again, Knife scores over rifle or pistol. Bowie-Knife in hand, an Iowan tells an English traveler that he "reckoned the United States could smash England *mee-ighty quick.*"

"This is a well-established case," comments *Harper's* in March, 1856:

Two students at a southern University quarreled. Not having Sir Jonah Barrington's Thirty-Six Commandments (the Code) before them, they decided to fight with the tools at hand. One was armed with a pistol, the other with a Bowie-Knife. The latter stood forth, knife in hand, and told his adversary to fire. The owner of the pistol remonstrated, telling his antagonist that they should at least wait until another pistol could be procured, as he did not like to take advantage of him.

The other youth, however, would not listen, and savagely bade him fire, and the latter, noting the gleaming blade, did so. The ball struck his adversary on the head, but the blow was a glancing one, and did little harm. Now it was the other's turn. With a mighty spring he was upon his opponent; the Bowie flashed, and the fearful weapon was driven deep into the unfortunate young man's skull. A crowd gathered, and carried him to the room of a medical professor—but he was dead. The Bowie had sunk so deeply into the skull bones that the professor was forced to *place his knee upon the body*, and tug with his whole strength to draw it out.

Under the heading "A Bowie-Knife Scrape," the following tale of one against many appeared in a New Orleans paper:⁸

A most terrific slaughter with a Bowie-Knife, 23 inches in

⁸ *Daily Picayune*, August 2, 1838 (II), 2.

length, and weighing 5 pounds, took place not long since at St. Marks, Florida. The particulars, according to the *Tallahassee Watchman*, are these: A man named Brown, a shopkeeper, had made some remarks against a female of that place, for which the hands on board the Steamer Izard threatened to punish him. Accordingly in the evening they in company with others went to the store of Brown: he hearing them coming, fastened his door, and armed himself with a Bowie-Knife. They immediately forced the door open, and Brown stabbed the foremost one in the breast so severely that he died a few hours after. He immediately struck at the second and inflicted a dreadful wound, cutting him from the shoulder across the breast and near down to the waist. It is thought that he cannot recover. He struck at the third, cutting him severely on the wrist, and we understand the arm will have to be taken off. Lastly, he made another effort, to cut at the fourth, but his knife striking against the upper part of the door, it fell from his hand; the balance of the crowd immediately rushed in, and he was overpowered and taken.

It becomes apparent all too quickly that the Knife's use will not be always against assassins, that the professional knifeman need not possess other virtues than his skill in order to beat off large numbers of the general public, that in fact users of the Knife will consider the unarmed fit subjects for jest and scorn long after the unarmed have tired of the joke.

Although *Knickerbocker Magazine*, in February, 1851, feels compelled to call Memphis "Beloved land of the pistol and the Bowie-Knife," it is apparent that in most cities, at least, law and order are again to be preserved. Even in California, in 1849, people in the East are begged to remember that better men are engaged in the Gold

Rush than "the Colt's revolver and Bowie-Knife gentlemen."

The legend remains; the citizens will rejoice as always when a fellow-citizen can defend himself, alone with his Bowie, against injustice and story-book odds. Any tale of a Robin Hood setting wrong right, and the villain dead or fleeing from the Knife, will bring pride wherever read. But soon the public has realized that while the hero *may* have a Knife, the scoundrel is *sure* to have one. More and more news stories of the Bowie reflect, not mere moralizing, but real distaste. "There is an old Colonel on the boat with his face all cut up; he had attempted to defend a young man from pillage by a gambler."⁹ "We learn that (Willis Allston) met General Reed . . . discharged two pistols into his body, and stabbed him with a Bowie-Knife."¹⁰ Blades no longer sweep and plunge; the barest statement of fact tells of serious injury or death, the sinking and moaning being taken for granted.

Edward Sullivan, in his *Rambles and Scrambles in North and South America* (quoted at length in *Living Age*, December 11, 1852), achieved the ultimate in deadpan descriptions of Knife society. Describing a quadroon ball at New Orleans, he notes the request that patrons leave their "implements":

You leave them as you would your overcoat on going into the opera, and get a ticket with their numbers, and on your way out they are returned to you. . . .

⁹ *Knickerbocker Magazine*, February, 1851 (XXXVII, 2), 182. For Californian attitude toward the Bowie, see Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Front*, 279.

¹⁰ *Niles Register* again: February 1, 1840 (LVII, 23, 5th Ser. v. 7), 368.

You hear the pistol and Bowie-Knife keeper in the Arms Room call out: "Number 45—a six-barrelled repeater; Number 100—one eight-barrelled revolver and a Bowie-Knife with death's head and crossbones cut on the handle; Number 95—one Bowie-Knife and one Arkansas Toothpick." All this is done as naturally as possible, and you see fellows fasten on their knives and pistols as coolly as if they were tying on a comforter or putting on a coat.

As I was going upstairs, after getting my ticket and replying to the quiet request "whether I would leave my arms" that I had none to leave, I was stopped and searched from head to foot by a policeman who, I supposed, fancied it impossible that I should be altogether unarmed . . .

I saw a difficulty take place in the barroom of the hotel where I was staying, between two young men, one of whom was killed. The perpetrator of the homicide wiped his Bowie clean on the clothes of the dead man and walked away, although more than a hundred men were present. It was "justifiable homicide"—the other man had called him a liar.

Even the participation of women in Bowie-fighting—and women of foreign blood, at that—cannot in one later account make the story worth more than a few lines:¹¹

At San Francisco, a Creole spitfire, or "ballroom heroine" from New Orleans was stabbed by a jealous Chilean. Between stitches of her wound she cursed alternately her assailant and her Adams Revolver that had missed fire. She had scarcely escaped from (the doctor's) hands when at a disheveled masked ball she struck her Chilean enemy a fatal blow with a Bowie-Knife.

The *Philadelphia Evening Courier* was stating hopefully as early as 1842, that the demand for Bowie-Knives

¹¹ Dr. J. W. Palmer, *The New and the Old, or California and India in Romantic Aspects*, 123.

has so abated that prices have fallen from \$20.00 to as low as \$1.50. The *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*,¹² commenting on such good news, declares: "The desire for murder declines in a ratio to the progress of temperance."

Bailey's astonished report to his fellow Englishmen, in 1838 (quoted earlier in this chapter), has joined humor with fear, and indeed conveyed a sense of gayety among the companions of the Knife. Bailey's account, in details and atmosphere, seems right for time and place; Bailey, it seems, would not have missed his two nights in Arkansas inns for a very great deal.

But if Bailey's notes carry conviction, so too do those of another British traveler, eight years later. Humor, romance, adventure are gone; even fear gives place to disgust. The difference may lie, of course, between travelers; but it seems to reflect a difference in attitude spreading over the country. Certainly the joke had worn thin, descending to the level of slovenly personal habit.

From *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, June, 1846, this second traveler's comments on a voyage up the Mississippi:

Above Dubuque, Iowa, we refueled, and I walked into a barroom there to see the type of the people. There were two cutthroat-looking men whom I should not like to meet on a dark night. One fellow was picking his teeth with a frightful looking Bowie-Knife; another, with a similar weapon, was whittling on a piece of wood.

Almost every man on this boat was armed with a Bowie-Knife, a detestable weapon with which the most frightful murders are constantly perpetrated. The owners of these made no

¹² October 14, 1842 (X, 276), 2.

attempt to conceal them, but appeared rather to take pride in their display, for they were constantly either picking their teeth or paring their nails with them; one felt, therefore, little inclination to have any dispute with their amiable owners.

Our traveler unfortunately seated himself in close proximity to one of the Bowie-Knife brethren who chewed an enormous quid of tobacco, spewing out over the deck. The chewer squirted so aimlessly that on one occasion his discharge struck the traveler in the left eye.

Henceforth the traveler was wary, and at the beginning of each discharge bobbed his head—upon which he was told, quite apparently in scorn:

“Sit still, stranger; I guess I’ll clear you!”

Indeed, the era of indiscriminate individual use of the Bowie must be said to end by early or middle fifties. To be sure, Lieutenant J. W. Revere, in his *A Tour of Duty in California*, as late as 1849 recommended as a state seal “Rampant Grizzly Bear, bearing the American flag furled to denote Peace, and a Bowie-Knife to enforce it, together with the motto Tuebor—‘I will defend.’” But any pride in the Bowie as weapon of Americanism, becomes more hesitant; by 1853 we hear the Bowie attributed to the Spanish-American! “Well,” says one Mr. Garner to his fellow members on a government survey, “we will soon be in the land of lassos and red pepper, Quien sabes and señoritas, fandangos and Bowie-Knives.”

Garner’s remark was apparently taken at face value by his companions, and quoted without remark in Ainsworth’s *All Round the World*, together with a story of how, in a previous trip to “the Spanish Southwest,” Garner saw a friend attacked and killed by four of the local ruffians. Soon Arkansas, first home of the Knife, was

to dispute its nicknames, "Bowie State" and "Toothpick State," preferring to be known as the "Bear" or "Wonder State." Murder for reason of private gain or personal vanity was effectively outlawed, though in its place came murder for political conviction, and the bloodshed that led to war.

6. TOWARD CIVIL WAR

FORTIES BECAME FIFTIES, and if there was yet hope of avoiding civil war, still every day there were skirmishes between the people who preferred bloodshed to slavery, and those who preferred bloodshed to Negro freedom.

While my references to the Bowie-Knife in the bloody border wars indicate aggression, mainly on the part of Missouri against Kansas, I will concede that Kansans used the Knife, and other weapons, against men of Missouri. I do not, in any event, intend to accuse slaveholder or abolitionist. Rather, I would demonstrate the ease with which the Knife assumed importance when men hunted men in ever-larger packs.

Preaching "abolition" in Kansas was known by both sides as an open invitation to death; Isaac Cody, father of Buffalo Bill, was killed while preaching atop a box "by the ferocious stab of a Bowie-Knife." And Connelley, in his *Quantrill and the Border Wars*, describes "a shocking affair" near Leavenworth:

Two ruffians sat at a table in a low grogery, imbibing potions of bad whiskey. One of them, named Fugert, belonging to Atchison's band, bet his companion six dollars against a pair of

boots that he could go out, and in less than two hours bring in the scalp of an Abolitionist. He then went into the road and meeting a Mr. Hoppe, who was in his carriage just returning to Leavenworth from a visit to Lawrence, where he had conveyed his wife, Fugert deliberately shot him; then taking out his Bowie-Knife whilst his victim was still alive, he cut and tore off the scalp from his quivering head. The pro-slavery men aided Fugert to escape from the territory by sending him down the river. He wore, upon his departure, the boots he so nobly won.

At least one clergyman recognized that, for escaped slaves, violence must commonly be met by violence. This was the Unitarian leader, Theodore Parker, as described in Bratton's *Legacy of the Liberal Spirit*, page 175.

Among the many slaves he defended were William and Ellen Craft who came to him to be married. Parker performed the ceremony in a Negro boarding house. Concluding the ceremony, he told William Craft that he must defend his wife against all crimes. Taking a Bible and a Bowie-Knife, which lay on the dining room table, he placed them in the husband's hands to use, one for the body's, the other for the soul's defense. The Crafts left for England.

Quantrill's border raiders, and those of Bloody Bill Anderson, Todd, Jennison, Montgomery, Brown, and Younger, all were armed "with Colt's revolvers and bowie-knives." Jennison, arsonist and murderer of women and children, made "bowie-knives" an especial object of his loot taken from Missouri.

In the Kansas elections of 1855, violence was marked by the presence of Missourians armed with the inevitable Bowies. In the Lawrence district were men from Ray, Howard, Carroll, Boone, Randolph, and Saline counties,

Missouri. They had guns, rifles, pistols, two pieces of artillery, and many Bowie-knives, and were led by Clai-borne F. Jackson. They had tents, flags, and music, and each voted several times, changing hats and coats each time. They said they had a right to vote, as Kansas belonged to Missouri. They ran several judges into the river, and stated that each man was prepared to go eight rounds without reloading—and that they would *go the ninth with the Bowie-knife.*

In Bloomington district, six hundred Missourians appeared in wagons and on horseback, led by the post-master of Westport. They absolutely refused to be sworn and when the judges remonstrated, rushed them with drawn Bowie-knives. They stated that they had been hired, at a dollar a day to come and vote, and they would do so or die on the spot. Bowie-knives also ruled the Tecumseh district, where men voted for themselves as well as their small children. In the 13th district several hundred Missourians assembled with guns and Bowie-knives. They wore hemp in their buttonholes. In the 14th and in the Doniphan districts men came from the Missouri counties Platte, Saline, Buchanan, and Clay. They were armed with Bowie-knives, and each voted eight or nine times, using different names. In the 16th district whole companies came from Platte, Clay, Ray, Chariton, Carroll, Clinton and Saline counties. They were armed with revolvers and Bowie-knives, and had hemp in their buttonholes, the password being: "All right on the hemp." In the 14th district General David R. Acheson made a speech, saying that they would all vote or kill every God-damn abolitionist in the country. They

were armed with Bowie-knives, and went on to the 18th district.¹

"Vote at the point of the revolver and the Bowie-knife," Benjamin F. Stringfellow advised an excited crowd about to enter Kansas. It was such enthusiasts whom a *London Times* correspondent met, as they returned from the first burning of Lawrence. As quoted by Connelley, the *Times* thus described the men of Missouri:

. . . Men, for the most part, of large frame, with red flannel shirts and immense boots worn outside their trousers, their faces unwashed and unshaven, still reeking with the dust and smoke of Lawrence, wearing the most savage looks, and giving utterance to the most horrible imprecations and blasphemies; armed, moreover, to the teeth with rifles and revolvers, cutlasses and Bowie-knives—such were the men I saw around me.

Indeed, making allowance for journalistic abandon, it was just such rough frontiersmen—and men of devout principles among them—who represented the Southwest in Confederate armies.

When the farmers of Concord went to war at the beginning of the Revolution they took along every sort of weapon, including hoes and scythes. When the back-woodsmen of the South went to fight for what they believed right, they took the Bowie-Knife.

In June, 1861, a regiment was mobilized in Tennessee and southwestern Virginia. It was composed of hunters and farmers, men used to life in the outdoors; as they marched through Winchester on their way to Harper's Ferry, it was noted by the correspondent for *Harper's*

¹ W. O. Blake, *History of Slavery and the Slave Trade*, 684-694.

Weekly that their arms consisted of tomahawks, revolvers, and Bowie-knives.²

During the summer of 1861, several companies of Arkansas volunteers were moved eastward to Virginia, where they joined Beauregard's army. These men carried in their belts Bowie-Knives to make the Tennessee variety seem tiny; more Bowies were fixed to their muskets and rifles for use as bayonets. And Mississippi, which divided the honors very evenly with Arkansas as the Bowie-Knife State, made equal display. The Mississippians were especially adept at throwing the knife, and long hours of camp practice were devoted to targets which they had nailed to convenient trees. In Northern papers meanwhile, the Mississippian was regularly caricatured as a "Colonel"—usually sitting cross-legged, by a table with decanter and glasses, and picking his teeth with his Bowie.

I had attempted some start toward the considerable research I felt would be necessary to explore use of the Bowie in the Civil War proper, when I saw how unsatisfactory would be my results: On the one hand, too many thousands of soldiers used knives modeled on the Bowie, effectively killing the enemy or saving themselves; clearly, the material was inexhaustible.

On the other hand, each use of the Bowie involved too many other factors for satisfactory narration. Antagonists had to be shown in such close fighting quarters as to explain use of the Bowie; the position of others fighting on both sides had to be clarified—and then the

² Material in this and the following paragraph is substantiated by *Harper's Weekly* of July 6, August 31, and November 9, 1861, and January 12, 1867.

Bowie was ordinarily used without flourish, more or less as in single-handed peacetime duels, as quickly and efficiently as the men fighting for North and South had been able to learn to wield it. After all, while perhaps the Knife could epitomize an era of boisterous expansion—and that era's youthful confidence and rough excesses—the Knife could hardly serve as central symbol for a nation convulsed in fraternal war.

I have, therefore, chosen for the most part only those examples of Bowie-knife lore found in Frank Moore's *The Civil War in Song and Story*. Mr. Moore's volume is so ample, so fully representative, that I feel he found for me, almost sixty years ago, all I could possibly find for myself.³

The Bowie's role at Fort Sumter can hardly be described as decisive, though the hero of the following narrative, Roger A. Pryor, of Virginia, was said to have represented everything fine in Bowie-knife tradition. Moore's story goes as follows:

During the attack on Fort Sumter in 1861, Pryor was one of the party who waited upon Major Anderson, the commandant. He seemed the very embodiment of Southern chivalry. With his belt bristling with revolvers and Bowie-knives, he seemed individually capable of capturing the Fort. Once inside he seemed to think himself master of everything, and in keeping with this pretension, seeing upon the table what he imagined to be a glass of brandy, seized and drank it without ceremony. Surgeon (afterward General) Crawford approached him and said: "Sir, what you have drunk is poison—it was the iodide of potassium—you are a *dead man!*" Pryor immediately collapsed—revolvers, Bowie-knives and all—and passed into the

³ Page references in Moore, for the five separate short narratives, are as follows: 25, 39, 315, 120, 68.

hands of the surgeon, who, by purgings, pumpings, and pukings, defeated his own prophecy in regard to the fate of the chivalrous one.

The following is from an adventure of a spy:

The bloodhound swam out to my boat . . . I drew my revolver, but hesitated to fire because the report might be heard and bring on a volley from the shore. The dog—reaching for me careened the frail craft. I threw down my revolver and grasped my Bowie-knife, which, as I drew it, glittered like a moonbeam on the stream. In an instant I had severed the sinewy throat of the hound, cutting through brawn and muscle to the nape of the neck.

In the escape of General John Morgan from the Ohio penitentiary, Moore gives this graphic description:

The General lighted a match. As the lurid glare fell upon their countenances, a scene was presented which can never be forgotten. There were crouched seven brave men who had resolved to be free. They were armed with Bowie-knives made out of case knives. Life, in their condition was scarcely to be desired, and the moment for the desperate chance had arrived.

At the Battle of Pea Ridge:

At Miser's farmhouse, on the ridge, on Friday morning . . . a soldier of the Twenty-fifth Missouri . . . and a Rebel . . . found themselves climbing the *same fence*. Each was armed with one of those large *Bowie-knives*. The rebel challenged his enemy to a combat . . . the challenge was accepted . . . they rolled up their sleeves, and began. The Missourian had more strength, but the rebel more skill . . . soon the former was covered with blood . . . he became desperate. The rebel made a stroke . . . became overbalanced. . . . The Missourian saw his chance. His blade, hurled through the air, fell with tre-

mendous force on the rebel's neck . . . nearly severing the head from the body. The victor, weakened by the loss of blood, fainted, and was soon after butchered by a Seminole, who had seen him fall.

The following, while not so sanguine, seems to have been a case of overzealous and misdirected justice:

Old Dick, a venerable negro in uniform, was arrested at Richmond for carrying a huge Bowie-Knife. He was on his return home to Danville after a campaign against the Yankees. He was Chief Drummer of the Eighteenth Virginia, and a hero of two wars. He was a veteran musician of a South Carolina regiment that served through the Mexican War . . . he had seen General Butler fall. In the Civil War, he was one of the first Virginia volunteers for the Confederacy, and had survived a hundred desperate engagements with his Bowie by his side. He was a gentleman and a patriot, and his knife, with its many proud associations, should never have been taken from him. He valued it above all things except his musket. Confiscating his Bowie-Knife was akin to taking his life.

And after the War? It has been said that the "era" of the Bowie was over. But still, not too infrequently . . .

Major Ned Burns and Colonel Twyman, both ex-Confederate officers residing in Mississippi, met at a place called Point Chicot, in Arkansas, to settle a difficulty of long standing. The weapons used were Bowie-Knives. Major Burns was wounded in the arm, and Colonel Twyman received three wounds in the body which are thought to be mortal. The latter was also severely injured in the face, his nose being entirely severed, and one of his eyes so injured as greatly to impair, if not entirely destroy his sight. The Colonel's second was slightly wounded by a thrust from Major B.—*Jackson Standard*, 15th.⁴

⁴ Reprinted in *Natchez Weekly Courier*, March 26, 1866 (New Ser. I, 36).

A frightful weapon was the Bowie-Knife. So terribly devastating, in fact, that far in advance of the duel noted above, the constituted authorities of the South had been forced to outlaw that Knife, singled out from all less deadly weapons.

7. THE STATE VERSUS THE KNIFE

Such casual murder as had been made possible by the Bowie-Knife, resulted in popular revulsion and legal furor. Indeed, there has been no parallel to the unique laws of the Southwest pertaining to the Bowie-Knife. These laws were unusual in wording, but very pertinent to period and problems: they were specific in naming the one weapon to be banned.

The new laws did not mention rifle or hunting-knife by name, certainly not by trade name. Not even the efficient new Colt revolver came under such ban. The laws were intended, not to ban the normal attacks and defenses of the day, but to outlaw that one fighting weapon which was sure death.

For the Bowie-Knife was, to put it mildly, responsible for the terrorizing of a half-dozen states. Even citizens not always concerned with order, now fearing for their lives, demanded legal protection.

Alabama had such laws on its books within a year of the Bowie's first sudden popularity:

AN ACT TO PROHIBIT THE BOWIE-KNIFE:

Section One: Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the state of Alabama, in general assembly convened; That if any person, carrying any knife or weapon

known as *Bowie-Knife* or *Arkansas Toothpick*, who, on a sudden encounter, shall cut or stab another with such a knife, by reason of which he dies, the same shall be adjudged murder, and the offender shall suffer the same as if the killing had been by malice and aforethought.

Section Two: And be it further enacted; That for every such weapon sold or given, or otherwise disposed of in this state, the person selling, giving or disposing of the same, shall pay a tax of one hundred dollars, to be paid into the county treasury; and if any person so selling, giving or disposing of such weapon, shall fail to give in the same, in his list of taxable property, he shall be subject to the pains and penalties of perjury.

(Approved June 30, 1837)

Evidently the legislators did not feel the law's penalties would prevent carrying of the Knife; the legislators had an eye out toward obtaining considerable revenue. Surely if all who sold such weapons had paid the new tax, state coffers would have overflowed.

Mississippi legislators were a fortnight ahead of Alabama in attempting to curb the new means of murder. Theirs was not, however, a specific Bowie-Knife law, the title being: *An Act to Prevent the Evil Practise of Duelling in this State—and for Other Purposes.* In Sections Five, Eight, and Nine the proscribed weapons are defined as "rifle, shotgun, sword, sword-cane, pistol, dirk, dirk-knife, Bowie-Knife, or any other deadly weapon," and in Section Eight the same weapons are enumerated twice.

One of the longest state anti-dueling laws on record, the Mississippi legislation left not a single loophole through which the lovers of premeditated homicide could wriggle.

In 1838 the Tennessee Legislature passed a law which was certainly the most far-reaching, yet specific, of all Bowie-Knife legislation. It was unique in naming the varied types of dealers who might sell edged weapons, specific in its mention of no other weapon than the Bowie-Knife (and the Toothpick), and drastic as to the total prohibition imposed:

**AN ACT TO SUPPRESS THE SALE AND USE OF BOWIE-KNIVES
AND ARKANSAS TOOTH-PICKS IN THIS STATE**

Section One—Knives Not To Be Sold Or Given Away: Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee; That if any merchant, pedler, jeweler, confectioner, grocery-keeper, or other person or persons whatsoever, shall sell or offer to sell, or shall bring into this State, for the purpose of selling, giving or disposing of in any other manner whatsoever, any Bowie-Knife or knives, or Arkansas Tooth Picks, or any knife or weapon that shall in form, shape or size resemble a Bowie-Knife or an Arkansas Tooth Pick, such merchant, pedler, jeweler, confectioner, grocery-keeper, or other person or persons for every such Bowie-Knife, or Arkansas Tooth Pick, or weapon that shall in form, shape or size resemble a Bowie-Knife or Arkansas Tooth Pick so sold, given or otherwise disposed of, or offered to be sold, given, or otherwise disposed of, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof upon indictment or presentment, shall be fined in a sum not less than One Hundred Dollars, nor more than Five Hundred Dollars, and shall be imprisoned in the county jail for a period of not less than one month nor more than six months.

Section Two—Knives Not To Be Worn: That if any person shall wear any Bowie-Knife, Arkansas Tooth Pick, or other knife or weapon that shall in form, shape or size resemble a Bowie-Knife or Arkansas Tooth Pick under his clothes, or

keep the same concealed about his person, such person shall be guilty of misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof shall be fined, in a sum not less than Two Hundred Dollars, nor more than Five Hundred Dollars, and shall be imprisoned in the county jail not less than three months and not more than six months.

Section Three—Penalty For Using A Knife: That if any person shall maliciously draw or attempt to draw any Bowie-Knife, or Arkansas Tooth Pick, or any knife or weapon that shall in form, shape or size resemble a Bowie-Knife or Arkansas Tooth Pick, from under his clothes, or from any place of concealment about his person, for the purpose of sticking, cutting, awing, or intimidating any other person, such person so drawing or attempting to draw, shall be guilty of a felony, and upon conviction thereof shall be confined in the jail and penitentiary house of this State for a period of time not less than three years, nor more than five years . . .

Section Five—Of Prosecutions: That this Act shall be enforced from and after the first day of March next. And it shall be the duty of the several judges of the circuit courts in this State to give the same in charge to the grand jury every term of the respective courts, and any civil officer who shall arrest and prosecute to conviction and punishment any person guilty of any of the offenses enumerated in this Act, shall be entitled to the sum of Fifty Dollars, to be taxed in the bill of costs, and the Attorney General shall be entitled to a tax fee of Twenty Dollars in each case, when a defendant shall be convicted, and no prosecutor required on any presentment or indictment for any of the offenses enumerated in this Act.

(Approved January 27, 1838)

The *Nashville* (Tennessee) *Whig* predicted great results for the new law:

The bill passed in January by the legislature, against the sale and use of Bowie-Knives, deserves to be reckoned among the most salutary Acts of the late General Assembly. Its provisions will effectually stay the use and sale of one of the most bloody instruments of death known to the present age, and every friend of humanity and good order must rejoice that the practise of wearing this barbarous weapon has been rendered a misdemeanor, and its use *in any way*, a felony.

Unhappily, the *Whig* proved wrong. *Knickerbocker Magazine*, describing violence in Memphis a full decade later, must still name that Tennessee metropolis: "Beloved land of the pistol and Bowie-Knife."

There need be no doubt of the legislators' good intentions as they passed their Bowie-Knife legislation. We can believe that these frock-coated "friends of humanity and good order" were truly concerned with the turmoil of the times, as well as with the demands of their humane or frightened constituents. Still, as they cast their votes they must have felt—gentle like conscience's prod—that constant pressure against their ribs of the Bowie and the Toothpick.

The Seventy-seventh Act of Alabama was one of the last bills directed against the Bowie-Knife. It was not intended to amend the Bowie-Knife Law of 1837, but extended the scope by including other weapons in the same category. It was:

AN ACT TO SUPPRESS THE EVIL PRACTISE OF CARRYING
WEAPONS SECRETLY

Section One: Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Alabama in General Assembly convened; That if any person shall carry concealed about his person

any species of firearms or any Bowie-Knife, Arkansas Tooth Pick, or any other knife of the like kind, dirk, or any other deadly weapon, the person so offending, shall on conviction thereof, before any court having competent jurisdiction, pay a fine not less than fifty nor more than five hundred dollars, to be assessed by the jury trying the case; and be imprisoned for a term not exceeding three months, at the discretion of the Judge of said court.

Section Two: And be it further enacted; That it shall be the duty of the Judges of the several Circuit Courts of this State to give this Act specially in charge to the Grand Juries, at the commencement of each term of said courts.

Section Three: And be it further enacted; That the Secretary of State shall cause this Act to be published for three months in the papers of Mobile, Montgomery, Tuscumbia, Huntsville, Wetumpka and Tuscaloosa, which publishers shall be paid out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated.

(Approved February 1, 1839)

Legislation alone did not end the Knife's activities. It must have been extraordinarily difficult for the anxious frontier citizen, pondering his country's troubles, to foresee that day when Bowie violence, punished consistently by courts under public pressure, might no longer threaten each man's existence.

Long after the fear died away, the Knife was to remain in American tradition as more than a mere hideous killer: Certain symbol of a national spirit, of a boasted hardness and self-reliance, even of frontier chivalry. While its abuses were recognized, and its practice forever restricted, still the very fact of American might, too irresistible to be unleashed, was reason for pride. If only

as that one extraordinary weapon without which no woodsman dared hunt the grizzly bear,¹ the Bowie was sure of continued fame.

It has been said that the Mississippi packet, the Bowie-Knife, and the Colt revolver were the three musketeers of pioneering in the new West. As page after page of the bloody saga has unrolled, the reader has been encouraged to consider the Bowie by no means the least of the three. Yet, as will be seen in the chapters next following, our historians, disagreeing among themselves as to almost every detail of the Bowie story, have, in almost no instance found out the truth.

¹ See "Grizzly Adams and His Bears," in *Land of Sunshine*, 1897-98 (VIII), 124. It was affirmed by many, after the Knife's first days of glory, that James Bowie had intended its use only against wild beasts, the guard above the handle being, for purposes of argument, overlooked.

3 THE DISCORDANT HISTORIANS



8. JAMES BOWIE'S LIVES

“. . . The stern, intrepid Bowie, who
Danger a thing familiar knew,
With feeble limbs and fevered frame,
Not even then forgot his fame;
For many a prostrate foeman felt
The shot his wasting vigor dealt.”

—*The Fall of the Alamo, Knickerbocker
Magazine* for September, 1836.

ONE SECTION OF this book must be devoted to fiction. For the mass of Bowie lore is composed largely—the weary researcher is tempted to say composed entirely—of startling untruths. Not that the historians' errors

must be revealed merely for the sake of chastisement or literary comedy: the legends that have grown around James Bowie and his Knife have their own interest, and are part of American folklore. Some of the false reports make almost as good stories as the truth.

Section IV will provide a short life of James Bowie. The present chapter may, then, be considered to narrate Bowie's other lives, as a creature of legend, the hero for whom his many worshippers created additional exciting adventures.

Even Bowie's birth, despite definite family statements as to date and place, has puzzled the historians. We find that those most revered reference works which employ the most learned authorities, are hopelessly at variance among themselves. In a reading, under "Bowie," of *Appleton's Cycloedia of American Biography*, *National Cycloedia of American Biography*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (editions of 1910 and 1937), *Century Dictionary and Cycloedia*, *Encyclopedia of U. S. History*, *Dictionary of American Biography*, the Spanish encyclopedias *Espasa Calpe* and *Universal Illustrada*, *Lamb's Biographical Dictionary of the United States* and the *Encyclopedia Americana*, it is to be observed that:

James Bowie was born in 1790 in Burke County, Georgia.

James Bowie was born in 1790 at some unspecified place.

James Bowie was born *about* 1790 in Burke County, Georgia.

James Bowie was born in 1795 at Elliot Springs, Tennessee.

(If Elliot Springs ever existed, it was not listed as a post office).

James Bowie was born at unspecified time, in Burke County, Georgia.

James Bowie was born between 1790 and 1796 in Georgia, or perhaps Kentucky. (*Britannica*, 1937)

James Bowie was born at unknown time and place.

James Bowie was born in 1796, in Logan County, Kentucky.
(*Britannica*, 1910)

Now it will be seen from family histories quoted in the following pages, that the last statement is correct: Bowie was indeed born in 1796, in Logan County, Kentucky. But the *Britannica*, thus correct in 1910, by 1937 was hesitant and inclined to error.

The legends of Bowie's fights are of course innumerable, and, in general, impossible to prove either false or true except for those stories of the Alamo retailed by non-existent "survivors." But Bowie's reputation is something else again. Bowie was *not* a duelist. There is *no* fight on record in which he was original aggressor; rather, every physical battle he is known to have fought was either defense of self or aid to friends whom he considered wronged. For more than a century, in fact since immediately after his death, Bowie's fame has rested upon complete misunderstanding.

Bowie's life was not, as so often described, the swift passage of a rip-roaring, swashbuckling desperado (the only redeeming trait of which was his last battle at the defense of the Alamo). Bowie was not pirate, or gambler, or murderous land-thief (whose services for an independent Texas may be belittled as gestures to clear a dishonored name).

I feel it may be of some value, in presenting the legend of the Knife, to include some of the rather remarkable vilification of Bowie. For just as Bowie's and the Knife's first glory were inseparable, so the Knife's later disrepute, and the infamy of many who wielded it, came somehow to be associated with Bowie himself.

Thus, in 1887, the *Philadelphia Press* published an article by one Samuel G. Bastion, purportedly "an Alamo survivor," which was widely quoted in other publications, and though easily disproved has greatly re-shaped Bowie's reputation:

... When I lived at Alexandria, Louisiana, it was a frontier town and the abiding place of many of the worst ruffians in the Southwest. Prominent among these was Bowie. He devoted himself to forging land titles. It is amusing to me to read accounts of his life, in which he is spoken of as a high-toned Southern gentleman, and a patriot who died for the cause of Texan independence.

He has come down to these times as the inventor of the Bowie-Knife, but my recollection is this: Bowie had sold a German, named Kaufman, a forged land title. Mr. Dalton, the United States Land Registrar, refused to record it, Kaufman threatened to prosecute Bowie and was promptly stabbed to death for his presumption.

In a suit at law shortly after, the United States District Judge complained of the endless litigation over land claims, and one of the attorneys answered sarcastically, that "Bowie's knife was the speediest and surest way of settling trouble about such disputes," and this I believe, is Bowie's connection with the historic knife.

Of all the falsehoods printed about James Bowie, and there were many, the above is probably the most preposterous, and the most hurtful to Bowie's name.

The report is made immediately suspect, of course, by the writer's claim to have been an Alamo survivor, when surely most readers remembered that "Thermopylae had its messenger, but the Alamo had none." No man among the defenders survived, although one lieutenant's wife,

together with a woman servant and two small children, were spared. But the writer goes on to compound his error, repeatedly proving himself and certainly disqualifying his own claim to any first-hand knowledge. He proceeds:

There was a bitter feeling between the partisans of Travis and Bowie, the latter being the choice of the rougher element in the garrison. Fortunately Bowie was prostrated by pneumonia and could not act. When Santa Ana appeared before the place most of the garrison were drunk, and had the Mexicans made a rush the contest would have been short. Travis did his best and at once sent off couriers to Colonel Fannin, at Gonzales, to hurry up reënforcements. I was one of these couriers, and fortunately I knew the country well and spoke Spanish like a native, so I had no trouble. On the first of March I met a party of thirty volunteers from Gonzales on the way to the Alamo, and concluded to return with them. When near the fort we were discovered and fired upon by the Mexican troops. Most of the party got through, but I and three others had to take to the chaparral to save our lives.

One of the party was a Spanish Creole from New Orleans. He went into the town and brought us intelligence. We were about three hundred yards from the fort concealed by brush, which extended north for twenty miles. I could see the enemy's operations perfectly.

Fortunately for Bowie's name, there is ample disproof of Bastion's contention. State records show that Bowie never had a land deal with a man named Kaufman, and did not kill a man by that name. Again, Bastion claimed to have been hidden in brush three hundred yards from the Alamo, when actually there was no chaparral or other natural cover within miles of that citadel. He mentioned

having been sent to Fannin, at Gonzales, when actually Fannin was not at Gonzales but on the contrary, as every student of Texas history knows, was at Goliad, a hundred miles nearer the coast, with a wilderness and no trail between himself and the Alamo. And whereas Bastion also stated that he and others were cut off from the Gonzales volunteers, as a matter of fact the entire volunteer band, thirty-two men in all, reached the Alamo and were killed in the following massacre. As for the defenders having been drunk, there was not a drop of liquor in the place.

Bastion even mixed his towns, somehow imagining that Fannin was killed at Gonzales. ("We had to make a detour to reach Gonzales on our second trip, but learned in time that the place was invested, and so were spared the fate of the garrison, for they and their commander, Colonel Fannin, were massacred by the Mexicans!") More remarkable, of course, than Bastion's tale was the ignorance of the editor who published the remarkable myth: Surely the American editor who, in 1887, did not know that Fannin and his men were massacred at Goliad, deserved no post in public information.

Bowie's financial ventures, too, have received extraordinary unfavorable, and usually unfair, attention. There is of course much made of his association with Jean LaFitte, the pirate, in smuggling Negroes into this country. Yet, to my thinking, condemnation of even such slave trade as was then illegal, must be mild except as we may condemn all who participated in that day's whole slave system.

Far more unfair are the various reports of "shady" land deals supposed to have been made by Bowie and his

older brother, Rezin P. Bowie. The brothers and their father were indeed land speculators, and generally successful. But the inference is too often drawn: Speculation plus success equal dishonesty.

In Josiah Shinn's *Pioneers and Makers of Arkansas*, the following appears:

In 1825 and 1826 all business (concerning land claims) was quiet in Arkansas. In the latter part of 1827, however, the Superior Court at Little Rock was confronted by 126 cases demanding confirmation, and demanding it vigorously. Every claim of these Spanish grants was a Louisiana claim, sold by John J. or James Bowie, or some other speculator, to men who lived in Arkansas. The purchasers were . . . ignorant of the origin of the claims they were pressing for settlement.

If the reader has inferred any shady dealing, he should be given this added information: Every claim Bowie sold was cleared.

Noah Smithwick, in his *Evolution of a State*, makes a more accurate statement of the Bowies' business deals and attitude toward money:

I renewed my acquaintance with him (James Bowie) in Louisiana in later years, when he and his brother, Rezin P. Bowie, were prosecuting a claim to a large amount of land in Louisiana under an old Spanish grant. The case was in all the courts and became celebrated as "the Bowie Claim." They won their suit and had a fortune, but Jim was prodigal with his money, though he was no gambler, and soon let his share slip away from him. . . . In the same way a fortune which he was said to have made out of the slave trade, carried on in connection with LaFitte, filtered through his fingers.

Frank W. Johnson, in his *History of Texas and Texans*, follows Bowie's land deals into Texas:

During the next few years (from 1828) only a few sales were made of eleven-league land grants in Texas, but in 1830 James Bowie went to Saltillo, and returned with fifteen or sixteen eleven-league grants, which he had induced Mexican citizens to apply for and had then purchased from them.

The Mexican government understood the nature of Bowie's operations. When, in 1830, Bowie applied for Mexican citizenship, Mexico took into consideration his status as a builder and a business man, his hundred land deals, and particularly his success with a steam sugar mill in Louisiana—the largest in the country, and the first in the Southwest.

It was, to be sure, perfectly natural for the Mexicans to demand some return from Bowie. They presumably knew that he would not have applied for citizenship had he not had some business proposition in view; hence, taking a card from his own deck, they gave him a conditional citizenship, practically a business citizenship. The *decreto del congreso del estado libre de Coahuila y Tejas*, No. 159, dated October 5, 1830 (of which the author has a copy before him, furnished from the Government archives of the City of Mexico) concedes citizenship to James Bowie provisional to his establishing a mill for weaving wool and cotton.¹ The commitment was fully carried out by Bowie.

¹ Translation of the full text follows:

Supreme Government of the State of
Coahuila and Texas

The governor of the State of Coahuila and Texas states to all its inhabitants, that the congress of the same has decreed the following:

Decree 159. The constitutional congress of the free independent and sovereign State of Coahuila and Texas has decreed the following:

The Charter of Citizenship is granted to James Bowie, a foreigner, on the condition that the establishment for the weaving of wool and cotton will be carried out, in the State.

In the one year 1830, Bowie bought and first used his original Knife, took Mexican citizenship in Texas, established a textile mill for the Mexicans, and purchased "fifteen or sixteen eleven-league grants." He was, indeed, operating full-time. But surely his land and building operations, while undertaken for his own profit, were in the accepted business tradition of the day. Yet the rumors against Bowie's business transactions have persisted through the years.

Of a different, comparatively harmless, sort are the innumerable stories of Bowie's knife prowess. Literally dozens of tales concern imagined fights in which Bowie and some evil foe are "shackled to a log," shackled foot to foot or hand to hand, or again "dueling across a handkerchief held at the corners." Sometimes the shackling stories are told of Rezin P. Bowie; in the histories of Arkansas and in magazines galore, similar tales abound to confuse the reader.

The battle of Vidalia Sandbar in particular has inspired writers to fantasy. The following account has been the source for Sandbar fiction for almost ninety years. From the *Woodville* (Mississippi) *Republican*, as reprinted in Littell's *Living Age*, May 5, 1860:

It is understood that the governor will order the printing, publishing, and circulation hereof. Done in the city of Leona-Vicario, September 30, 1830.—Ramon Garcia Rojas, deputy president.—Mariano Garcia, deputy secretary.—Vicente Valdez, acting deputy secretary.

Therefore, I order that this be printed, published, and circulated and given its due fulfillment. Leona-Vicario, October 5, 1830. .
Rafael Eca y Muzquiz

Santiago del Valle
Secretary

THE GREATEST DUEL ON RECORD

The famous duel in which forty or more gentlemen were engaged in 1828 is still remembered in Natchez. Colonel Jim Bowie, the great fighter and inventor of the knife which bears his name, used to spend a great deal of time in Natchez. He was challenged by a gentleman of Alexandria, Louisiana, whose friends to the number of twenty or more accompanied him to Natchez to see fair play—knowing Bowie was a desperate man, and had his own friends about him. All parties went upon the field.

The combatants took their places in the center, separated from their friends in the rear far enough not to endanger them with their balls. Behold the battle array thus:

Twenty armed Louisianians fifty yards behind their champion and his seconds and surgeon, and opposite them, as far behind Bowie and his seconds and surgeon, twenty armed Mississippians.

Behold the heights of Natchez thronged with spectators, and a steamer in the river rounded to with its deck black with passengers, watching with deep interest the scene. The plan of fight was to exchange shots twice with pistols, and to close with knives, Bowie being armed with his own terrible weapon. At the first fire both parties escaped. At the second the Louisianian was too quick and took advantage of Bowie, who waited the word. At this Bowie's second cried "foul play!" and shot the Louisianian dead. The second of the latter instantly killed the slayer of his principal. Bowie drove his knife into this man. The surgeons now crossed blades, while, with loud battle cries, came on the two parties of friends, the light of battle in their eyes. In a moment the whole number were engaged in a fearful conflict. Dirks, pistols and knives were used with fatal effect until one party drove the other from the field.

I do not know how many were killed and wounded in all, but it was a dreadful slaughter. Bowie fought like a lion,

but fell covered with wounds. For months he lingered at the Mansion House before he fully recovered.

By AN OLD MISSISSIPPIAN

The following account, signed "L. P. H.," appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 28, 1881: The writer is considerably more detailed in his story of blood, than was "Old Mississippian":

. . . I stood by the side of my father, among a number of citizens of the city of Natchez, and witnessed the fight in question, and will make oath that the following is true:

They (the Bowie brothers) emigrated to Mississippi in the year 1802 and engaged in the speculation of the rich cotton and sugar lands of that section. The staple of cotton at that period, bearing almost a fabulous price, gave impetus to land monopoly, and the Bowie brothers found themselves confronted with another land speculating company, of which Judge Crain was the recognized head, both parties having a following of about seventy-five or one hundred men each, all men of wealth and social position, and all "on the fight."

They (the Bowie brothers) were both sportsmen—that is, they bet against the popular game of the day, faro, and played "brag," the twin brother to poker. Judge Crain was chivalry personified. He had emigrated from South Carolina to Louisiana.

A challenge to fight a duel had passed between Dr. Maddox, of the Crain party, and Samuel Wells, of the Bowie party. According to the terms of the fight neither Judge Crain nor James Bowie were to be present, because a deadly feud existed between them. Bowie doubted that Judge Crain would prove faithful to the agreement, and sent a courier to spy his actions. The parties to the duel met, but friends from the city of Natchez went over, and through their influence restored amicable relations. To cement these relations the parties sent across the river to Natchez for champagne, brandy and Havana cigars.

Circled around a spring which flowed from the west bank of the river, all hostile feeling was swallowed up by the generous liquid, and everything was tinged with the rainbow hues of friendship—when Judge Crain put in an appearance. He, too, joined in the conviviality, pleased that no blood was to be shed. But there was another appearance to be made before another hour had passed. While thus pleasantly occupied, a rustling was heard in the willow boughs that overhung the steep bank which led down to the spring, and, turning their faces, the manly form of James Bowie met their eyes.

His appearance meant fight—and at it they went. Judge Crain was the first man who arose from his seat, and with his pistol shot Bowie, the ball passing entirely through his body, but failing to cut any cord which bound him to life. Bowie fell down, and Judge Crain, with the spear in his sword-cane, ran up and endeavored to stab him. Bowie skilfully parried the stab of the spear, and, collecting his energies, reached up with his left hand and caught Judge Crain by the cravat, which, according to the fashion of the day, was tied securely around the neck. He drew him down close to his body, and with his right hand secured the spear and ran it through his heart, Judge Crain dying upon the body of his prostrate foe, who meantime fainted from the loss of blood.

As soon as Crain discharged the pistol the friendly feeling which had previously existed was dissolved quick as a snowflake falling on a heated furnace, and the friends of the two parties separated and commenced firing on each other. Six were killed, and fifteen wounded. The writer hereof takes pleasure in stating that his father was the first man who said: "Men, let's rush in between them and stop the fighting."

There is no need to labor the point: Quite beyond the fundamental error in the Bowie legend that gives James Bowie his Knife at Vidalia Sandbar, three years before

its invention, the legend also makes Bowie the sole mover of bloodshed, and his duel "the greatest on record." The accounts published at the time, and quoted now for the first time in Chapter 2 of this book, have been entirely ignored.

Likewise ignored has been a greater "duel on record," a knife fight before Bowie's time and far from our Southwest. For the record, and to place Bowie's admitted feats in perspective, it might be well to recall Sir John Purcell, of North County Cork, Ireland. Over seventy years old, Sir John was awakened one night in 1811 by sound of thieves. Though armed only with a carving knife, Sir John stood behind his bedroom door as the thieves entered, their pistols in hand; stabbing them one after another, he killed four and wounded an undetermined number before the survivors fled.

Sir John's feat is retold in full in Chamber's *Edinburgh Journal*, July 4, 1903. If there is any comparable single-handed victory in Bowie-knife history, it has been strangely unreported.

9. TALES OF THE KNIFE: ITS THIRTEEN INVENTORS

AS MIGHT BE expected, the tales of Bowie's "first use" of his Knife are wonderfully diverse. Add to such pleasant profusion a baker's dozen of supposed "inventors" for the Knife, including Bowie himself, and the possibilities for fiction are unlimited. I must add, in all fairness, that many of the accounts of the Knife's origin are very readable, if wholly imaginary.

Rezin P. Bowie, James' brother, is most highly fa-

vored as the Knife's inventor, being given full or partial, certain or possible, credit by almost half the twenty-nine encyclopedias and dictionaries of history checked. But in addition the following have their adherents:

"James Bowie," the hero himself (Sometimes Rezin *and* James are credited)

"James Bowie," the hero's father (but Bowie's father was not named James).

One John Sowell.

Snowden, a Louisiana blacksmith.

"A Philadelphia cutler."

Noah Smithwick (who did not himself claim to have done more than copy the original knife).

"Manuel, a negro blacksmith on the Bowie plantation."

"Pedro, a famous New Orleans cutler."

Jesse Cliffe, a blacksmith working for Rezin P. Bowie.

And, finally, two brothers, named Blackman, whose work was later "improved upon by an Arkansas blacksmith." (Clearly both "Blackmans" and the "Arkansas blacksmith," as well as the "Philadelphia cutler" listed above, must all derive from that Philadelphia-trained Arkansas blacksmith, James Black.)

'Captain Reese Fitzpatrick, gunsmith, of Natchez, bore the honor in some quarters of having made the original Bowie-Knife. It was generally agreed that the Bowies he did make were far superior to the millions made in Britain, in that his blades were elastic while the latter, with blades hardened in order to present a high polish, were hardly stronger than pot-metal. A knife made by Fitzpatrick for Dr. L. P. Blackburn, of Mississippi, was so elastic that it quivered at being touched, and bore "an unsurpassed edge, keen as the lightning flash." (Dr. Blackburn exhibited the weapon to the armorers at Louis-

ville, in an attempt to have them adopt the like for "state defense.") It was also Fitzpatrick who forged blades for special presentation to military heroes and, at Sam Houston's suggestion, made the first Bowie-bayonets.

But to our fiction; for the old narratives, coupling each history of "the Knife's origin" with heroic action, false though they be, will die hard. Surely, that the staid works of reference can credit such diverse romances of James Bowie's Knife, proves most vividly the strength of the legend.

With rarest exceptions, the encyclopedists believe that Bowie had his Knife at Vidalia Sandbar. Some sources indicate that the Knife was new to Bowie at that time, but most give us melodramatic stories of earlier first use. Here, therefore, follow further tales of James Bowie:

Colonel Bowie is said to have had his sword broken off to about twenty inches of the hilt in a fight with some Mexicans, but he found that he did such good execution with his broken blade that he equipped all his followers with a similar weapon. (*Encyclopedia Americana*, 1936)

According to another story, Bowie made his Knife from a file. . . . It seems probable that Bowie got the idea of the Knife (from knives used by) Mexicans in Texas and along the Mexican border. (*Encyclopedia Americana* again: Thus persists the story told in the fifties, as shown in Chapter 5, disclaiming "Anglo" origin, the Knife then no longer being considered a national pride.)

The Dictionary of American Biography, while admitting that accounts conflict, prints only the "Sowell family tradition": James Bowie, out Indian-fighting, let his hand slip to the blade of his knife, cutting himself painfully;

Bowie, by this report, asked John Sowell, a Texas blacksmith, to make him a knife with a guard. "It is certain," the *Dictionary* goes on, "that the weapon became widely popular."

The reports which credit Rezin P. Bowie with the Knife's invention, tend to ascribe as his purpose the hunting of wild cattle (the source of this theory being "an intimate friend of the Bowie family"). Of Rezin also it is stated that his hand once slipped over the blade of his knife, and that he too had the brilliant idea of a guard. The W. P. A.-produced State Guides for Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi, though with slight variations in their stories, tend to credit Rezin P. Bowie for the Knife's invention, just in time for Vidalia Sandbar. The Louisiana volume, intimating Louisiana manufacture, still grants that "both Mississippi and Arkansas contest with Louisiana for the honor"; but the various Guides agree that the Knife's first use was on the Sandbar.

Even those few texts which put the Knife's invention after the Sandbar battle, connect Knife and battle if only through invention by Bowie as he lay wounded. Thus *Appleton's* would have Bowie using a knife in the battle "made from a blacksmith's rasp," apparently having fair enough success with it, and sending it off to a Philadelphia cutler as a model.

"When the original was received by Bowie, he was told," says *Appleton's*, "It is more trustworthy in the hands of a strong man than a pistol, for it will not snap:" (It is a rather remarkable notion, this, that anyone should have to tell Bowie, after the Sandbar battle, about the virtues of a good knife.)

Noah Smithwick, in his *The Evolution of a State*,

claims some fame for himself and dramatizes Bowie's appreciation of the Knife thus:

The blood-christened weapon which had saved its owner's life twice within a few seconds was an ordinary affair with a plain wooden handle, but when Bowie recovered from his wound he had the precious blade polished and set into an ivory handle mounted with silver; the scabbard being also silver-mounted. Not wishing to degrade it by ordinary use, he brought the knife to me in San Felipe to have a duplicate made. The blade was about 12 inches long and two broad at the widest part. . . . When it became known that I was making a genuine Bowie-Knife there was a great demand for them, so I cut a pattern and started a factory, my jobs bringing all the way from five dollars to twenty dollars, according to finish.

The sick-bed theory is the only popular theory of invention of the Knife by Bowie himself. John Henry Brown, in his *Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas*, has Bowie contriving the Knife while recuperating in Texas. But it is "L. P. H." the little child who "stood by the side of his father and witnessed the (Sandbar) fight," who again devised the most satisfactory legend, complete even with some possible reference to James Black. After his father "rushed in and stopped the carnage," "L. P. H." continues (italics mine):

James Bowie lay for months in the city of Natchez before he recovered from his wounds. He was a man of much mechanical ingenuity, and while thus confined, whittled from a piece of white pine the model for a hunting knife. This he sent to *two brothers named Blackman*, in the city of Natchez, and told them to spare no expense in making a duplicate of it in steel. This was the origin of the dreaded Bowie-Knife. It was made

from a large sawmill file, and was afterwards improved upon by an *Arkansas blacksmith*.

That James Black has here become a total of three blacksmiths, is in the Bowie-Knife saga a most modest development.

10. TALES OF THE KNIFE: REZIN'S CONTROVERSY

THE FIRST STORY of the Bowie-Knife, by "P. Q.," was published 110 years ago; and while one may occasionally discover excerpts from it in recent accounts, it is quite apparent that the modern authors have used garbled scraps without ascertaining the source. Originally published in 1838, and reprinted in 1841,¹ it has not been wholly in print since that time. Already, two years after James Bowie's death, the record was so distorted as to engage Rezin P. Bowie in bitter contradiction of all "P. Q." wrote. Their correspondence follows:

Correspondence of the Baltimore *Commercial Transcript*

New Orleans, June 1, 1838.

Sketches of Texas—Number 7

Gen.—Better Known as Col. James Bowie:

The name which heads this letter is but a poor index of its contents. The writer has spoken more of things intimately connected with the reputation of Gen. Bowie, than of the acts and character of that gentleman himself.

Gen. Bowie was killed at the taking of the Alamo; he was murdered in his bed, where he had been confined a long time by severe illness.—This is all of his Biography, "He lived and

¹ *Baltimore Commercial Transcript*, June 9 and 11, 1838 (V), 78-9. Previously reprinted only in William Kennedy's *Rise, Progress and Prospects of the Republic of Texas* (II), 127-8.

he died," and though his name is known in every corner of the United States, he did no act while living which should distinguish him from the common mass of men. His reputation fills every corner of the United States; *but it is a reputation which is not to be desired and one which is not rightfully his own.* (Italics mine—R. W. T.)

The public is greedy of novelties; fond of fancy sketches—is never more than half right, and predicates much of its opinion upon supposed, not real, facts. The idle talk of today is repeated with additions tomorrow, remains uncontradicted the next day and so travels on till History claims it as its own, remodels it and publishes it anew, fortified by argument, proving that to be true beyond a doubt, which at an earlier period was known to be too plainly false to demand contradiction.

It is in order that justice may be done to the dead; that Gen. Bowie's reputation may be divorced from its present intimate but unjust and false connexion with the origin and history of one of the most fearful and destructive weapons of modern invention, that the writer has been induced to give this letter to his memory.

Perhaps there is not one among your readers who has not seen a "Bowie-Knife"—there certainly is not one who did not feel a thrill of horror pass through his frame when for the first time he looked upon that keen and well-polished weapon.

The Roman short sword conquered the world—the Turkish scimitar threatened the liberties of Europe, and the destruction of Christianity. The Bowie-Knife combines the superior qualities of both its predecessors;—the downward blow and home thrust, lopping a limb or piercing the stoutest armor, and the light sabre stroke, halving a silken cushion or severing a head with an ease and rapidity which leaves the hapless loser half-unconscious of his loss.

Among the many means invented for man's destruction, the Bowie-Knife is the most effective in execution, the most fearful

to the sight and imagination. The blade measures twelve inches in length, fashioned of excellent material; the true Damascus was never better.

Observe its edge—keen and smooth, and so perfect that a barber might use it in his trade. Its point is curved and hollowed at the back, cutting both ways, like a two-edged sword. It is two inches broad at the heel and of proportionate thickness. The weight, alone, is sufficient to give effect to a descending blow; and a child, thus armed, might well intimidate a man of strength and courage. Fighting at a distance protracts the contest, and close combat has been the most decisive; and should there at any time hereafter be an occasion, when the one-half of our country shall be arrayed against the other, the fate of each dependent upon a single battle; the Bowie-Knife will decide the question—it won the battle of San Jacinto.

Not many years since a gentleman of the name of Bowie (It will appear that Rezin is meant—R. W. T.), now a resident of Louisiana, emigrated from Kentucky to the western and wilder parts of the then Territory of Arkansas, for the sole purpose of pursuing without interruption the exciting pleasures of the chase. An inborn, engrossing love for those vigorous sports, which, in the olden time, defied many a hero, and which the poets have thought to be a fit preparation for a nobler contest, characterizes a large part of our Western population.

Mr. Bowie was no amateur; he was a real *artiste*; a true descendant from the great hunter of the scriptures; and as we find all excellence, whether mental or physical, seeking its full perfection and enjoyment in solitude, so that gentleman sought the wilds of Arkansas alone and raised for himself a lodge far distant from the smoke of any human habitation.

But he who, at the present day and in our country, judges of the increase of population, and the progress of settlements from data drawn from the history of other times and other lands will form calculations as wide of the mark as were those of the

simple shepherd, who was surprised to find Rome unlike his own little village.

Mr. Bowie had not hunted the deer many months through the well-cleared and open grounds of an Indian forest when, one evening on his return from the chase, he was surprised to find, like Crusoe upon his island, the print of a man's foot at his threshold. His retirement had been broken in upon by one of that class of men who, while they compose the most useful and indispensable, are also the most restless and wandering of the trades; a blacksmith. Knowing that the material upon which he labors is the agent of every improvement, the substratum of society and civilization, the worker in iron boldly pushes out, penetrates the wilderness, and is ever found pressing hard upon the heels of those who locate a town, or project a city. The writer speaks from observation. Mr. Bowie is a man of sense; he did not resent the intrusion; neither did he, like Boone, collect his chattels and seek a solitude further in the west, for he knew that the sound of the settler's axe would soon be heard at the foot of the Rocky mountains.

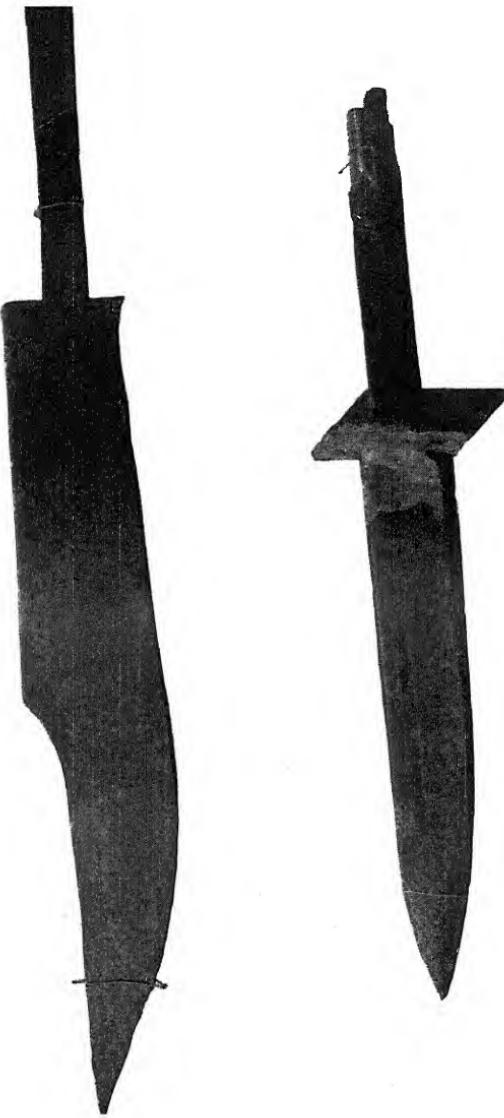
—Mr. Bowie is a man of sense; before we part, the writer will show him also to be a man of gentleness and peace. Mr. Bowie made a virtue of necessity; he found the blacksmith at his door; the forge was raised; the bellows in full operation; the man of the anvil demanded employment. Mr. Bowie calculated his riches and consulted his wants; he had brought with him many things which he did not need; he had neglected to bring one thing which he could not dispense with.

He struck a balance between superfluity and scarcity and presented the former to the blacksmith with a condition that he should supply the latter.

Mr. Bowie did not hunt the deer alone; he found a more dangerous and therefore a nobler game. The Bear of the South, if not a more ferocious animal than the Bear of the North, is less easily pursued and taken with more peril. He haunts the



REZIN P. BOWIE, who manufactured the knife with which James Bowie fought the famous Sandbar Battle of 1827. Rezin was older than his famous brother, James



BOWIE-KNIVES all had one-piece blade and shank. First step (top) the knife blank is cut out of a solid piece of steel. The guard is forged (bottom), and shank butt is threaded. This is the dirk-knife or toothpick type

banks of our water-courses, and low marshy grounds, thickly covered with cane, through which the sportsman often finds it necessary to open a path, and where he not infrequently closes with his antagonist in an embrace which might not be agreeable to one unprepared for such an encounter. A Nimrod of the provident school usually wears a broad blade in his belt when he intends to stir up Bruin in his quarters,—and it was that necessary defense which Mr. Bowie now found absent from his armory.

The contract was soon closed. The blacksmith received of Mr. Bowie's abundance and in exchange converted under Mr. Bowie's instructions an aged file whose teeth had become dull with much service, into the *first Bowie-Knife*.

The above is from the *Transcript* of June 9th. The continuation appeared in the issue of June 11th, as follows:

The first Bowie-Knife was not idle. It drank deeply of the blood of the strongest of the forest and opened many a fair path through the tall, thick-standing cane, which rejoices in the flat bottoms of the Arkansas; tinting the silent water with its foliage and bending its tufted head as if to kiss the mirror of its beauty.

The first Bowie-Knife was not idle; but its first steps were innocent—the legitimate objects of its creation. Time passed on; that mighty alchemist which, in its course, changes all things.

The Bowie-Knife tasted of human blood, and like the young lion, it ever after eschewed all meaner prey.

Mr. Bowie wearied, at length, of the chase. All our pleasures pall upon the mind and the senses. Mr. Bowie gave a parting grasp to his friend, the blacksmith, and returned again to the haunts of civilization. In the course of years, he visited the town of Alexandria, an incorporated village, prettily situated upon the banks of the Red river; as he stepped from the boat to the

landing, he was met by an acquaintance, who informed him that his brother, James Bowie, was about to settle a difference with a *friend* according to the received laws of duelling. Mr. Bowie hastened to the battle ground; the principals took their positions—rifles had been selected, the word was given—Colonel Bowie's weapon missed fire; his antagonist's missed effect. "James" exclaimed Mr. Bowie, advancing towards his brother and drawing from its scabbard the trusty blade he ever wore belted to his side, "James, take this; your rifle may strike farther, but the blow is not so sure."

A change of arms was readily assented to; Colonel Bowie's *friend* was supplied with the necessary weapon in the shape of a butcher's cleaver. The contest was renewed at close quarters; Colonel Bowie killed his antagonist, and from that moment he retained the preserver of his life and wielded the knife to some purpose upon his deathbed at the fall of the Alamo.

Col. Bowie, subsequently to the event just related, visited Philadelphia and while in that city, he engaged a cunning artisan to make a copy and more perfect specimen of his brother's invention. The shrewd mechanic pleased his employer, but he retained a model of the novel instrument he had fashioned and the manufacturers at Smithfield soon received his orders.

The writer has thus given your readers a true history of the origin of the Bowie-Knife; a weapon which will enter largely into the future story of the manners of our country, which will be spoken of as the anomalous product of an unsettled age, whose introduction into the West set the laws at defiance and retarded the progress of good order and refinement a quarter of a century.

And what is the character of its inventor? Col. (James) Bowie was a man of blood. In the olden time, he would have been deified as a hero; in modern days, had his courage expended itself in legalized warfare, he would have been commended as a patriot. Not so his brother. Mr. (Rezin) Bowie is well-

known in this state as an intelligent planter; kind and affable in his manners and an enemy to violence.

But he is also known as a man of courage and nice honor; never seeking a difference, and a peace maker between others. When a real affront is given, he sees that it is righted. He has had his single combat. While in Havana, many years since, a Spanish gentleman questioned in his presence the soundness of American courage. Mr. Bowie declared himself to be a native of the United States; the Spanish gentleman reiterated his doubts; Mr. Bowie threw down the glove—knives were selected; Mr. Bowie desired that their feet might be shackled; the allusion was understood and the request acceded to.—Mr. Bowie lives.

Mr. Bowie has two beautiful and highly accomplished daughters, who can bring down the deer in her swiftest flight, and hit the boss of the target at every shot, possessing that combination of Spartan energy and courage, with the excellencies of modern refinement which forms the perfect woman. Can the writer say more?—No!

Yours, P. Q.

No doubt “P. Q.,” writing in 1838, felt that his composition would not be read beyond Baltimore. But, through the extended reprinting, which was then newspaper commonplace, his story reached Rezin P. Bowie. And Mr. Bowie, despite reference to his daughters’ accomplishments and his own chivalry, considered himself abused and slandered. His reply to “P. Q.” was submitted in anger:

To the editor of *The Planters' Advocate*—Sir:

My attention has been drawn to an article (originally inserted in the *Baltimore Transcript*, and thence copied into *Alexander's Weekly Messenger*) in which some correspondent of the *Transcript* has undertaken to give the public an historical account of

the "Bowie-Knife." I should not probably have noticed his remarks had he confined himself to the subject by which the article is headed; but it is impossible for me to bear patiently the constant repetition of abuse and slanderous comment on myself and family, through the newspapers, without an effort on my part to suppress them.

The Baltimore correspondent has undertaken a task for which he is, from his ignorance of the facts, totally incompetent; and for the purpose of correcting him, and satisfying those who may feel an interest in the origin of this weapon, and in the manner in which it acquired the name, I will briefly state everything interesting connected with it. The assertion of the correspondent, that I had wandered from Kentucky, into the western wilderness parts of Arkansas, where I could enjoy uninterruptedly the pleasures of the chase, is gratuitous, and has no foundation whatever in fact; no less untrue is the story of the "wandering blacksmith."

The first Bowie-Knife was made by myself in the parish of Avoyelles, in this state, as a hunting knife, for which purpose, exclusively, it was used for many years. The length of the knife was nine and one-quarter inches, its width one and a half inches, single edge, and blade not curved (hence not a true Bowie-Knife in anyone's imagination—R. W. T.); so the "Correspondent" is as incorrect in his description as in his account of the origin of the "Bowie-Knife." The Baltimore correspondent must have been greatly misinformed respecting the manner in which Col. James Bowie first became possessed of this knife, or he must possess a very fertile imagination. The whole of his statement on this point is false.

The following are the facts:

Colonel James Bowie had been shot by an individual with whom he was at variance; and as I presumed that a second attempt would be made by the same person to take his life, I gave him the knife to be used as occasion might require, as a

defensive weapon. Some time afterwards (and the only time the knife was ever used for any purpose other than that for which it was intended, or originally destined) it was resorted to by Colonel James Bowie in a chance medley, or rough fight, between himself and certain other individuals with whom he was then inimical, and the knife was then used only as a defensive weapon—and not till he had been shot down; it was then the means of saving his life. The improvement in its fabrication, and the state of perfection which it has since acquired from experienced cutlers, was not brought about through my agency. I would here assert also, that neither Col. James Bowie nor myself, at any period in our lives, ever had a duel with any person soever.

Respecting my deceased brother, Colonel James Bowie, the statement made by the "correspondent" that he was generally known, is correct; but his slanders on character are the offspring of a malicious mind, and the effusion of a dastardly scribbler. Those who knew Col. Bowie appreciated his good qualities; while those who condemned him had no other reason than what they gathered from the false assertions of idle, malicious correspondents and lying editors such as the *Baltimorean* and his able coadjutors.

I have borne these impertinent attacks for nearly two years. During that period, no opportunity has been lost to comment upon the conduct of my family; and the only grounds for this unwarrantable interference are the facts which I have herein narrated.

Whether they be or be not sufficient to justify such remarks is immaterial, as I have resolved to prevent a repetition of such mention of myself and family, or to punish those who have any agency in such publication. And I hereby state, unequivocally, that I shall hold any editor personally responsible for all such observations, original or communicated, found in his journal. I rely on the courtesy of all editors adverse to the invasion of

the sanctity of private reputation, to give this an insertion in their columns.

I am, sir, your obedient servant,

Iberville, La., Aug. 24, 1838 (Signed) Rezin P. Bowie

Rezin P. Bowie, writing in anger, thus set the record considerably straighter: His brother was not to be considered a duelist, and he himself had nothing to do with any development of the Knife beyond the first rude stage at which he describes it. ("The improvement in its fabrication, and the state of perfection which it has since acquired from experienced cutlers, was not brought about through my agency.") There is nothing, after all, in the history of the Knife which would preclude our believing that Rezin's early knife was to some degree copied in the model James Bowie presented to James Black; Black, in turn, while changing the model, may well have kept some features of the Bowies' originals.

Black himself may have given one Arkansas historian, Judge W. F. Pope, the impression that Rezin, rather than James Bowie, had whittled the discarded model. While Black may, as his mind grew weaker, simply have confused James and Rezin Bowie, still Pope's story checks with Rezin's presumably accurate answer to "P. Q." If James Black thus knew and acknowledged Rezin Bowie's part in that original model, proof is added that it was Black who brought the Knife to what Rezin calls its "state of perfection."²

Rezin, in his answer to "P. Q.," makes one additional point with utmost clarity: that dead brother's fame was live brother's concern, to be defended as might need be.

² Be that as it may, the fact remains that Rezin's description fits a common kitchen knife, while P. Q. describes a genuine Bowie to perfection.

“P. Q.” accordingly hastened to disclaim any responsibility for the story which, he says, some other anonymous gentleman “stated that he had heard”:

New Orleans, Sept. 17, 1838

To the Editors of the *Baltimore Transcript*—

Gentlemen:

A letter addressed to the *Planters' Advocate*, by Mr. R. P. Bowie, has fallen under my observation. The writer of the article complained of was actuated by any other than malicious motives in giving that sketch to the public press.

The History of the Bowie-Knife, as published in the *Baltimore Transcript* of the 9th June, was given to the writer by a gentleman who stated that he had heard the story so often related that he could vouch for its truth. Had the writer supposed that it contained anything which could have grated upon the feelings of Mr. Bowie, he most assuredly would not have been instrumental in giving it circulation.

With regard to the late Col. Bowie, the writer spoke of him from the impressions he had received from the floating remarks he had met with in the newspapers of the day, and in general conversation. He looked upon Colonel Bowie as a man belonging to history, and certainly wrote nothing with an intention of invading private reputation.

Your most obedient servant,
P. Q.

II. TALES OF THE KNIFE: THE ARKANSAS NARRATIVES

I HAVE DEPENDED, in my assertion that James Black was true inventor of the Knife, on many proofs: The first-hand knowledge of three generations in the Jones family; internal evidence in a number of the conflicting stories

(particularly those which refer to "Blackman brothers," the "Arkansas blacksmith," and the "Philadelphia cutter") and the internal evidence in Rezin P. Bowie's answer to "P. Q."

There is, finally, the evidence of the Arkansas historians. In the history of three other states, Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, we do indeed find contrary claims to Bowie-Knife origin, but these are scattered shreds, contradictory and without the least substantiation, without, in fact, any detail beyond the bald assertion that Sowell (or Snowden, or Smithwick, or Cliffe, or Manuel, or Pedro) invented the Knife. There is no connection with other events in state history; there is, in short, no narrative. Arkansas has the narratives.

Arkansas has always been designated *the Bowie State* by the encyclopedias. The name could, of course, have resulted from the state's exceptional number of Knife duels. To be sure, knife fighting as an art largely originated in Arkansas. But surely the encyclopedists might have considered the possibility that Arkansas might be still closer connected with the Knife. They would not have had to look far for their evidence. In Maro O. Rolfe's *Arkansas; A History*, surely an obvious reference, we read that "The original Bowie-Knife was made at Washington, Arkansas, by James Black." The American History Society, in *Arkansas and its People*, apparently recognizes the possibility of earlier models (as suggested at the end of my preceding chapter), but makes clear that the Bowie-Knife was "made to perfection only by James Black."

I have, from the Arkansas material, chosen four nar-

ratives to testify to Black's invention of the knife. While it will appear that some few details are not consistent, especially in Goodspeed's report, still, on the bulk of the story, they agree. Clearly originating from different sources, these accounts are to me the more convincing for their minor variations.

Fay Hempstead, in her *Pictorial History of Arkansas* (St. Louis, 1890), reported Knife history as follows:

A matter of interest concerning the town of Washington in early times is to the effect that the knife which afterward became famous under the name of Bowie-Knife, was originally made in that town by a man named James Black. The account of its origin is given as follows: James Bowie, a small man, light and quick in movement, came from Maryland to Natchez, Mississippi, and thereabouts; and from there ranged through southern Arkansas and contiguous parts of Louisiana and Texas. In the course of his movements he became involved in a personal difficulty in which he was challenged to fight a duel.

The conditions of the contest were that the combatants should tie their left hands together over a log between them, and with the right hand to cut with a large knife until death, or until one was satisfied. Bowie had no knife to suit him and there was no place nearer than old Washington at which he could get one. He went there, but could find none to suit him. He then found Black, who had come there from Philadelphia as a blacksmith and silversmith a short time previously, and was an expert workman. Bowie gave him the size and pattern of the knife he wanted, cut from stiff paper. Black made the knife as directed, and Bowie used it in the duel, killing his antagonist with it. The pattern of the blade was peculiar, and all similar knives came to be called Bowie-knives. In the course of time almost all large knives came to be so called without their really being anything like the original from which they were named.

Weston Arthur Goodspeed, in *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northeast Arkansas* (Chicago, 1889), changes "James" to "Dr. William" Bowie, and differs considerably from the other Arkansas historians in his account of the bargain struck between Bowie and Black; the outlines of the story do, however, remain. But it is Judge W. F. Pope, Arkansas pioneer and indefatigable historian, who wrote the fullest published account of Black's invention. Remarkably enough, he has seldom been quoted, even in part. The following passage is from Judge Pope's *Early Days in Arkansas* (Little Rock, 1895):

In the minds of some, not overly well disposed towards our state, the words "Arkansas" and "Bowie-Knife" are synonymous terms and that weapon has been classed as an important part of every Arkansan's personal outfit. The fact of the matter is, the Bowie-Knife had its origin in as peaceable manner and purpose as did the fowling piece of the sportsman.

In 1827, or 1828, there came to Washington, Hempstead county, Arkansas, from where I do not know, a man named Black, who was an expert workman in all kinds of metals, being also a gunsmith, and who possessed the secret of tempering steel to a hardness that has never been equalled since. There was then living at Walnut Hills, Lafayette county, a wealthy planter named Reason Bowie, who afterwards fell at the storming of the Alamo. (Rezin was not at the Alamo.—R. W. T.)

Reason Bowie was a keen lover of the chase, and spent most of his time in hunting the bear and deer, in which the country then abounded. On one of his visits to Washington, Bowie called on Black the artificer, and engaged him to make a hunting knife after a certain pattern of his own designing. Bowie whittled out of the top of a cigar-box the exact shape of the knife he desired made. He told the smith that he wanted

a knife that would disjoint the bones of a bear or deer without gaping or turning the edge of the blade. Black undertook the job and turned out the implement of the hunt which was afterward known as the Bowie-Knife. The hilt was elaborately ornamented with silver designs. Black's charge for the work was ten dollars, but Bowie was so pleased with the excellence of the knife that he gave the maker fifty dollars.

I have seen handmade needles of the smallest size produced by this man Black. I do not hesitate to make the statement that no genuine Bowie-Knives have ever been made outside of the state of Arkansas, for when Black died, some time after the late war, his secret of tempering the steel, which was the main point of excellence of the Bowie-Knife, died with him. Many imitations have been attempted, but they were not Bowie-Knives.

As before-stated, the Bowie-Knife was originated for use on wild beasts, and not on living man. That it has degenerated from its original purpose is no fault of its early designer or maker. The Bowie-Knife was sometimes called an "Arkansas Toothpick," and Arkansas is occasionally sneeringly referred to as the *Toothpick State*.

I am aware that there have been published at different times several versions of the Bowie-Knife, all at variance. One account states that James Bowie, of Alamo fame, originated the knife with which to fight a duel with an antagonist, each having their left arms tied together over a log.

Several months ago I met a descendant of the Bowies, who informed me that his great-uncle, James, once fought a desperate duel with a Mexican with knives, and that the combatants sat on a log facing each other within striking distance, and that the leather breeches which each wore were securely nailed to the log.

Judge Pope, who was acquainted with many of the pioneers of Arkansas, may have met Black in 1867, and it was almost surely Black who confused Rezin with James

Bowie. Black's mind wandered, and he frequently had hallucinations due to a brain concussion; on the other hand, as before stated, Black's confusion, if the confusion was his, would most likely indicate that he knew Rezin was somehow involved in designing James Bowie's first crude model of the Knife.

Dallas T. Herndon, in his *High Lights of Arkansas History* (Little Rock, 1922), thus fills in Black's story:

Black was a native of New Jersey, where he was born in 1800. He served an apprenticeship in metal-working which ended in 1818, and removed to Hempstead county, Arkansas, about 1824, where he found employment with another blacksmith by the name of Shaw. In 1830 James Bowie, while in Washington (Arkansas), procured Black to make for him a knife, according to a pattern which he is said to have whittled out of an old cigar-box. Black made the knife, but after completing it made another by a pattern of his own, and when Bowie called for his knife Black offered him his choice of the two. He promptly selected Black's pattern.

Not long after this Bowie became involved in a duel with three desperadoes and killed them all with the knife Black had made. After that when anyone wanted a knife from Black he would order it to be made "like Bowie's." It was in this way that the name originated.

One obvious reason for confusion over the origin of the Bowie-Knife, would be the modesty of Arkansas historians. Arkansas had resented the names "Bowie State" and "Toothpick State," and her historians have perhaps not strained to spread Arkansas' Bowie lore.

For Arkansas and the Knife were consistently the butt of the joke. T. B. Thorpe, in his sketch, *The Big Bear of Arkansas*, names the crude hero's comic dog "Bowie-

Knife." At home and abroad, identification was all too obvious: "I met a journalist who has taken notes among Cincinnati pork dealers, Kansas fights, Choctaw fevers, Missouri lead mines, and Arkansas Bowie-Knives." (*Knickerbocker Magazine*, August, 1861.) The inference was obvious, and Arkansas always sought to play it down.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, America, and particularly the West, suffered under a deluge of British "travellers," who crossed the Atlantic with the one set purpose in mind of writing their "impressions" of the people and the country. Some of these writers, notably Captain Basil Hall¹ and Mrs. Trollope, apparently sought only grounds for contempt. Others, however —and in our hurt pride we have not remembered these as long—came in earnest search for information and adventure. George Featherstonhaugh, for example, traveled among the people, lived with them, recorded excellent impressions, and even pioneered and mapped certain portions of the wilderness.

Yet despite his fairness, when, in the fall of 1834, Featherstonhaugh visited Arkansas, his impressions were not altogether favorable. Concerning the people and their customs, in his *Excursion through the Slave States*, he wrote:

One of the most respectable inhabitants of Little Rock told me that he did not suppose there were twelve citizens of the place who ever went into the streets without, from some motive or other, being armed with pistols or *large hunting knives about*

¹ Captain Basil Hall, R.N. (*Travels in N. America in the Years 1827-1828*), examined Navy Yards, lectured on British infallibility, and generally mocked our Navy and "natives." Playing "Peeping Tom" at the ladies' staterooms, Hall was peremptorily ordered off a Mississippi steamboat by its captain at Chickasaw Bluffs, five hundred miles from the

a foot long and an inch and a half broad, originally intended to skin and cut up animals, but which are now made and ornamented with great care, and kept exceedingly sharp, *for the purpose of sticking and slashing human beings*.

Featherstonhaugh, fortunately for us, described the knives used in Arkansas in 1834. He did not, however, title them "Bowie-Knives," since the name was not in general use at that period.

But the Bowie itself was. Indeed, "the Bowie State" saw plenty of knife-play that was no laughing matter. For Arkansas, on the old Chihuahua Trail, was the pioneer gateway to Texas, and along that trail was bred a type of savage fighter second to none. (The state has boasted for many generations, of having a larger proportion of native-born Americans than any other state.) It is small wonder that nearly everyone went heavily armed. Where murders were everyday occurrences, and the murderers commonly not discovered, even judges and senators must not venture out unarmed.

nearest settlement. Such sure death was forestalled only by the intervention of passengers. The gangplank was down, the Briton's baggage going ashore, when the master reluctantly relented. (Reported in *Niles Register*, July 24, 1830.)

4

JAMES
BOWIE

12. ORIGINS

FINALLY THERE REMAINS legend, the legend of James Bowie. Long after the Knife has disappeared from use, after the historians have finished confusing the record, Bowie's story remains what it was a century ago: The symbol of a nation in explosive growth.

That Bowie should become legend, was almost inevitable. Short, violent, quixotic, his life had, to an extreme degree, the drive, the half-aware larger purposes, so characteristic of our impatient expansion. Even our knowledge of his forebears indicates the symptomatic restlessness, the material progress alternating with confused dissatisfaction, and that unabashed mixture of magnanimity and self-interest which more sophisticated

generations do not achieve. Like Bowie himself, his grandfathers combined statesmanship and chivalry with what, today, we might not let stand so nakedly on our public records.

Perhaps those were days when national figures and issues could be judged whole, rather than on whatever few black or white levels adversaries and friends might choose to debate then. Perhaps those were years when our leaders were accepted for what they could contribute, and understood as representative of contemporary forces. (Nor do I mean that the generations of Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln were without moral criteria.) In any event, this last section of my book is no full-scale biography of the hero, but rather the framework of truth underlying his legend, presented without attempt to reconcile by psychological analysis attributes which may seem to the modern reader contradictory.

I find particular interest in the opinions held concerning Bowie by his highest-esteemed contemporaries. Consider, for example, the bemused admiration of Thomas Carlyle, the English historian, and of Theodore Parker, leader of the Unitarian church. As reported by the *Texas Telegraph and Register* for June 20, 1850:

Four years ago, when Theodore Parker, the eminent theophilanthropic preacher of Boston, visited Europe . . . he called on Thomas Carlyle. The English solitaire plied the American with innumerable questions relating to our customs and habits of social existence . . . but manifested the keenest curiosity concerning the people of the backwoods. Parker drew for the other's amusement a vivid sketch of the achievements of Bowie, the famous arch-duellist of Texas. Carlyle listened with



JAMES BLACK, who invented the Bowie-Knife at Washington, Arkansas, in 1830, three years after the Sandbar Battle. His unmarked grave is in the Old Cemetery at Washington, Arkansas

CAMP LIFE in the Confederate Army—
Mississippi, practicing with the Bowie-Knife



sparkling eyes till the close of the narrative, and then burst into involuntary exclamations of enthusiasm:

“By Hercules! The man was greater than Caesar or Cromwell—nay, nearly equal to Odin or Thor! The Texans ought to build him an altar!”

The burning sympathizer with the heroic in all its phases rubbed his hands together, chuckling in an ecstasy of savage glee, and made Parker repeat his bloody anecdotes. Finally he put the question:

“But by what miracle could it happen that the brave fellow escaped the capital penalty of the law after such countless violations?” This Parker could not explain, but the truth is that in Western courts juries are absolute judges of both the law and the fact, and their interpretations often evince direct antagonism with the dicta of My Lord Coke and the classic comments of Blackstone. On the subject of homicide in particular, public opinion has passed the bounds of all books of law, and settled as an immutable statute this extraordinary axiom:

“It is justifiable to kill in fair combat every body and any body who ought to be killed!”

Henry Clay called Bowie “that fine gentleman and patriot,” as well as “the greatest fighter in the Southwest.”) Among his numerous references to Bowie in speeches and letters, there is allusion to their first meeting, in a stagecoach on the Cumberland Road in 1832.

Clay himself must have told the story frequently; it was later repeated by Jefferson Davis. The reader is left to draw his own conclusions as to why the tale made such an impression:

Bowie, seated by William McGinley,¹ was unknown

¹ Details in the following account are as reported by McGinley, of Douglas, Kansas, in *American Notes and Queries*, July 27, 1889 (III, 13), 155.

to his fellow passengers in the Cumberland Road stage-coach. These passengers included Clay, McGinley, a stranger with a pipe, and a young girl. Muffled in a huge cloak, apparently deep in thought, Bowie faced constantly out the window. The pipe-smoker, seated beside Mr. Clay, soon filled the stage with smoke, and the young girl began to cough. When, leaning forward, she asked the pipe-smoker "please stop smoking as she was ill," the smoker replied only "that he had paid his fare, and would do as he pleased."

"The words were no sooner out of his mouth," says McGinley, "than my seatmate sprang up, threw aside his cloak, and drew from the back of his neck a wicked-looking knife, *the worst I had ever seen*. He quickly seized the smoker by the chin, and, snapping his head back, placed the blade of the knife at his throat, saying: 'I will give you just one minute to throw that thing out of the window!' Needless to say, this was done, upon which my seatmate resumed his place, and again pulled the greatcoat about his face. At the next stage stand, Mr. Clay and I introduced ourselves to the stranger, and learned that he was James Bowie." McGinley goes on to report that Clay often expressed his admiration for Bowie, as dating from this, their first meeting.

The admiration of his fellow frontiersmen for Bowie was of course frequently expressed, notably by Sam Houston.

John J. Bowie, of Mississippi, eldest of the Bowie brothers, is the source of our surest knowledge concerning his and James Bowie's family. As quoted by a Dr. Kilpatrick, in *De Bow's Review*, October to December,

1852, John J. Bowie is clear and certain as to the disputed points of his brother's birth:

(James Bowie was born in the spring of 1796, in Logan County, Kentucky. His father, Rezin Bowie, and mother, Elvira Jones, both natives of Georgia, were indeed married in Burke County, Georgia (where so many historians would have James Bowie born), in 1782, but after John was born, around 1787, they moved to Tennessee and thence (after six or seven years of "frequent skirmishes with the Indians" and "the conflicts then so common to that devoted country") to Kentucky. By John's account, the family had been in Kentucky some three years when James was born there. John himself was then ten.)

John Bowie did not relate at any length such family history as he did not know first-hand. But the services of local historians in Virginia, Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas,² make possible a remarkably full Bowie family history documented for over a hundred years. The Bowie clan, descended from three Scottish brothers who came to this country in the early eighteenth century, can be traced to at least ten states of our South and Southwest.

Two of the three Bowies from Scotland settled in Maryland, one of these later moving to Virginia; the third, James' direct ancestor, made his home at Edgefield, South Carolina. Each of the brothers married and reared a family, members of all three branches participating actively in the Revolution. The Maryland branch in-

² For Virginia references, see the Federal Writers Project *Virginia, A Guide to the Old Dominion*, 544. For the remarkably full Georgia account see A. D. Candler's *Revolutionary Records of Georgia*: II, 49, 698, 729, 780; III, 76, 571; *Colonial Records of Georgia*: IX, 632; X, 132, 492, 715; XII, 174. For Tennessee, see J. Guy Cisco's *Historic Sumner County, Tennessee*, 230; and for Texas, John Henry Brown's *Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas*, 135, 137.

cluded one state governor, but is perhaps better remembered through the famous Bowie race-track.

The members of the Virginia branch, some of whom later removed to Georgia (and lived near James Bowie's father), were well known in public affairs. One of them, another James, had a ferry at Port Conway on the Rappahannock, and it was said that he often ferried George Washington at that point. Following his death the widow, Sarah, took over the business. She was a good business woman, as is evidenced by the success of her petition, November 4, 1779, to the General Assembly to repeal an act which "required James Bowie or heirs of his public ferry to set foot-passengers across the Rappahannock free." Still prospering twenty-two years later, Sarah again asked legislative aid on December 24, 1801, requesting authority "to increase ferriage rates from Port Royal to Port Conway."

In the family's southernmost branch, Captain John Bowie had a company in the Fifth Regiment, South Carolina Troop of the Continental line. His brother, Rezin (whose name was pronounced "Reason" and so spelled by himself), was also a soldier in the Revolution, and was captured by the British and imprisoned at Savannah.

Now the Savannah prisoners were often visited by their sympathizers, women bringing them clothing and delicacies. One young lady so engaged in ministering to the prisoners' needs was Elve or Elvira Jones (sometimes called Elvy), of a prominent Georgia family. Rezin Bowie became acquainted with her, and in 1782 they were married. When armed strife ceased with England, Rezin and Elvira settled in Georgia, and from their union came John J. Bowie, who has told his brothers' history, Rezin

Pleasants Bowie, who defended James' name, and James Bowie, hero of the Alamo.

We find ample proof to show that the Bowies, long before James Bowie's activities in Louisiana and Texas, invested their moneys and their hardest labor in the land. In September of 1766 James Bowie, of Georgia, the hero's uncle, petitioned for three hundred acres of land. Again in April, 1767, we

Read a Petition of James Bowey (spelling varies in the records—R. W. T.) Setting forth that he had ordered him One Hundred Acres of Land which on going to survey appeared not to be vacant. That he was possessed of a wife, four Children and a Negro and was Desirous to obtain Lands for Cultivation Therefore praying for One Hundred and fifty Acres on Lambert's big Creek at the Mouth of Merry Hill Spring Branch about Two Miles from land ordered Reason Whitehead.

In February, 1768, Bowie again applied for land, this time for one hundred and fifty acres in St. George's Parish, which Petition was granted by the Governor the following June. And in March, 1769, and again in January, 1772, we find James Bowie back still trying for land, mentioning "two Children for whom he never had any land," and "praying for Two Hundred Acres" and "One Hundred Acres" more.

If James Bowie, of Georgia, was indefatigable in his demand for land, and at the same time honored with a number of appointments to minor state office, Reason Bowie was not to be satisfied with Georgia acreage. To be sure, immediately after his brother's last grant ("Governor signs a land grant to James Bowie, of 287½ Acres Sept. 16, 1784"), Rezin Bowie requested and received

like acreage (October 1, 1784, and January 3, 1785). But Reason was not content to stay put, being of that extraordinary pioneer fibre that urged him on, from whatever prosperity, toward new frontiers. In 1787 Rezin (optional *Reason*) Bowie sold out his Georgia property and moved to Tennessee.

There Reason made further land transactions. On November 10, 1793, Reason Bowie purchased from James and George Winchester 640 acres of land on Station Camp Creek, one mile west of the village of Gallatin. This transaction was, however, only another of Bowie's speculations, it being recorded that two months later he sold 287 acres of the land to James Odom. The remainder was no doubt parceled out to others, though there is no sales record extant. At any rate, after seven years in Tennessee, Reason Bowie was already preparing to move once more, to Kentucky.

We find Reason listed on the tax books of Logan County, Kentucky, April 10, 1794, as the owner of three slaves and five horses. Again on March 20, 1795, he is listed with eight slaves, eleven horses, twenty-three head of cattle and one stud horse. On April 1, 1796, Reason Bowie is listed as the owner of eight slaves, seven horses, eleven head of cattle and one stud horse. In 1797, he had two hundred acres of land, on the waters of Read River, which had been entered, patented and surveyed in his own name—and also nine slaves and eleven horses. The Logan County tax books for 1798 are missing from the archives, but on September 16, 1799, they show Reason Bowie listed with only the same property as in 1797. Clearly he had decided to move once again.

Some time during the following winter, Bowie sold

his Kentucky land, stock, and non-removable property to Ralph Law, and took his departure for Louisiana. Law is recorded as owning, in 1800, the land previously entered in the name of "Reason Bowey." (Thus, as I believe has never before been shown, the Bowies clearly moved from Kentucky to Louisiana in 1799-1800. Indeed, all previous historians omit the Kentucky years altogether, moving the Bowies to Louisiana direct from Tennessee, Georgia, or even Maryland.)

Elvira Bowie had borne Reason ten children in Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The first were twin girls, Lavinia and Lavia, both of whom died in infancy. The next was David, said to have been a remarkably pious youth, who died at nineteen; then followed Sarah, who grew to womanhood and married a Mr. Davis, dying in her first childbirth at Opelousas, Louisiana. Mary was next in line, who became Mrs. Abram Bird; then came John J., who outlived his famous brothers, and died in old age in Issaquena County, Mississippi. These six were all born in Georgia.

Rezin Pleasants Bowie, named for his father, was born at Elliot Springs, Tennessee, September 8, 1793, only a few weeks before the family moved to Kentucky; and James, hero of the Knife; was born in Logan County, Kentucky, April 10, 1796. After James came Stephen, who was a planter on Bayou Boeuf, Louisiana, and Martha the last child, also born in Kentucky.³

³ Martha married James Nugent, who was accidentally killed, and then Alexander Sterrett, who was the first sheriff at Shreveport, Louisiana. Alexander Sterrett was cast from the same mold as were his brothers-in-law, and liked nothing better than to share their wild adventures. He accompanied James Bowie on at least two expeditions to Texas. When killed in performance of his sheriff's duties he left grandchildren in Shreveport, and also a widowed daughter, Mrs. Reizette Bowie Donley.

When Reason Bowie, Sr., moved from Kentucky to Louisiana, he first went to Catahoula Parish, later to Bayou Teche, and finally settled in Opelousas, where he died in 1819. His widow, who had met him so romantically at Savannah, died at the home of her son-in-law, Sterrett, at Shreveport, in 1837. She was the real type of pioneer woman, and was noted throughout the Southwest for her kind nature and fine principles.

Rezin P. Bowie, the elder of the two famed brothers, was married in 1812 in the Catholic church at Natchitoches, Louisiana, to Frances, daughter of Daniel Neville. His wife bore five children, two of whom died in early childhood. Martha A. died at New Orleans in 1853 at the age of twenty-one; Matilda E. married Joseph H. Moore, and when widowed lived at New Orleans with a son, John S. Moore. Elve A. (named for her grandmother) married Taylor Moore, and died in Claiborne County, Mississippi, in 1872.

Rezin P. Bowie was three times a member of the Louisiana legislature and filled other important positions in Louisiana in addition to having Texas interests. He was self-educated, a fine orator, and an accomplished gentleman. He died at New Orleans January 17, 1841.

During the first years the Bowies spent in Louisiana, the three brothers, John J., Rezin P., and James, were almost inseparable. Together, they formed a trio that was hard to beat "at any man's game." John J. Bowie, the eldest, was a good business man, and schemed the trio into possession of huge sums of money. Rezin P. Bowie was political counselor, and when needs be, a fighter. James, the youngest, was early acknowledged the leader in any dangerous enterprise conceived by his older brothers.

Rezin P. Bowie was rich while still very young, and at one time he was the owner of three separate plantations —one in Arkansas, another in Mississippi, and a third in Louisiana. John J. Bowie was a member of the territorial legislature at Helena, Arkansas, and owned a fine country seat near that place and another in Mississippi. James might be said to have "lived in his pocket," except that at one time he was part owner with both elder brothers in their Arkansas plantations. Most of his time was spent in roving about the Southwest, particularly Texas, which he visited as early as 1826. He inherited his father's penchant for dealing in land, and litigation in the same took up a good part of his time.

John J. Bowie has left a vivid portrait of his young brother:

James spent the most important part of his childhood (between the years 1802 and 1809) in Catahoula Parish. About the year 1814 he left my father's house and launched upon his own life. He settled upon Bayou Boeuf, Rapides, and cleared a small piece of land, but his chief means of support was sawing plank and other lumber with the common whipsaw, and boating it down the bayou for sale.

After reaching the age of maturity he was a stout, rather rawboned man of six feet height, weighed 180 pounds, and was as well made as any man I ever saw. His hair was light colored, his eyes gray and rather deep-set—very keen and penetrating—his complexion fair, and his cheekbones rather high.

His anger was terrible, and *frequently terminated in some tragic scene*. He was social with all men, fond of music and amusements, and would take a glass in merry mood. James was also fond of fishing and hunting. He roped and captured wild deer in the woods, caught and rode wild and unmanageable

horses, and was even known to rope and ride alligators. He had a method of catching bears which was entirely original.

After finding a place where the bears usually entered the field, he procured a hollow cypress knee of suitable size. After this hollow was cleaned out, sharp iron spikes were driven through it with the points turned inward and inclined downward, similar to the fingers of a fish-trap. Being thus prepared, some honey was placed in the bottom of the inverted knee, and the whole placed at the spot where the bear crossed the fence.

Bruin would come along and in his eagerness to get the honey would thrust his muzzle down among the spikes, when, in trying to withdraw, they pierced the skin, and held him fast—and in this blindfolded condition he was an easy prey.

As the country improved and landed property became enhanced in value James sold out his land on the bayou and used the means thus obtained in speculating in the purchase of Africans from Jean LaFitte, the pirate, who brought them to Galveston for sale.⁴ James, Rezin, and myself fitted out some small boats at the mouth of the Calcasieu, and went into the trade on shares. Our plan of operation was as follows:

We first purchased forty negroes from LaFitte at the rate

⁴ The *Galveston Daily News*, March 16, 1920, contributes the following to our story of Bowie's early enterprise:

"Warren C. D. Hall, a kindred spirit of the Bowies, accompanied James Bowie on many Texas expeditions, and was with him in several battles. In 1816 Hall went to Texas with Commodore Henry Perry, and at Bolivar Peninsula attempted to establish a buccaneer camp like that of Barataria (The LaFitte stronghold in Louisiana), but they lost their vessels in the Bay of Galveston during that winter. In 1817 Jean LaFitte and several other shipowners started the second buccaneer camp on San Luis (now Galveston) Island, and Warren C. D. Hall, who was in some way always connected with such establishments, became intimate with Jean LaFitte, president of the communal settlement. On a visit to Rapides, Hall met Bowie and informed him of the opportunities that awaited him in his line of business should he visit Campechy (LaFitte's settlement). Early in 1818 James and Rezin accepted his invitation, and were accorded a royal reception by the buccaneers.

"Jean LaFitte took a great liking to Bowie, seeing in him a kindred

of one dollar per pound, or an average of \$140 for each negro; we then brought them into the limits of the United States, delivered them to a custom-house officer, and ourselves became the informers. The law gave the informer half the value of the negroes, which were put up and sold by the United States Marshal. We then bought the negroes, took half as our reward for informing, obtained the marshal's sale—which entitled us to sell them within the United States.

We continued to follow this business until we had made \$65,000, when we quit and soon spent all our earnings. James then went into land speculation and soon made \$15,000. This business necessarily caused him to spend much of his time in the woods, where natural inclination gave the employment a peculiar charm to him.

He had a hunting knife made which suited his fancy, by a common blacksmith named Snowden. In after years this knife became famous, owing to some very tragic occurrences which originated as follows:

About the year 1826 James became involved in the political and party squabbles of the day, and his fiery, impulsive nature caused him to enlist all his energies in the strife. At this time he resided in Alexandria, on Red River, and in some of the momentary excitements of the day an altercation took place between him and the sheriff of Rapides Parish, a Mr. Norris

spirit, and it is said that they resembled each other remarkably in a physical way, and were often seen together. The Bowie brothers secured the slave business of the settlement. It was the custom of Stone (a slave trader) and others in the business to pay \$1 per pound for able-bodied slaves; the ones who were ill were usually knocked on the head and thus put out of the way. LaFitte and the Bowie brothers would not adopt this custom, but instead they offered a smaller sum for those of the slaves who were ill, their illness being due to the brutality and starvation methods of the Spanish slavers while on shipboard. The mortality of the slaves in the stockade was nevertheless very great.

"It was at the 'maison rouge' or Red House, which also was a fort, that James Bowie met many of the figures who were to make Texas history."

Wright, during which Wright shot James in the left breast while he was unarmed; but had Wright not been rescued by his friends, James would have killed him with his fists. This attack so enraged him that he had a neat leather scabbard made for his hunting knife, and affirmed that he would wear it as long as he lived, which he did. About twelve months after his difficulty, or in September, 1827, the great duel took place at Natchez.

John Bowie described his brother, and all three brothers' business operations, with remarkable candor (incidentally indicating Snowden's knife as a knife used before, and perhaps at, Vidalia Sandbar). Such was James Bowie in the Southwest, who would soon play the hero's part.

13. MANHOOD

ON APRIL 22, 1831, at San Antonio de Bexar, James Bowie married Maria Ursula, daughter of Don Juan Martin de Veramendi, Lieutenant-Governor of Coahuila and Texas (and god-daughter of General Santa Ana, Mexican commander who planned the attack on the Alamo). The "dowry papers," authenticated by Jose Maria Salinas, the constitutional *Alcalde*, were witnessed by Jose Francisco Flores and Ygnacio Arocha, and reveal that he settled upon his bride the sum of \$15,000; and that his property, in Texas and the United States, was worth \$222,800. To Maria Ursula were born two children, but during a visit in 1833 to her old home in Monclova, she, the children, and her father all died with the cholera.

Such is our knowledge of James Bowie's marriage. Captain William G. Hunt, of Texas, wrote of the Bowies

(as quoted in John Henry Brown's *Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas*):

I first met Colonel Bowie and his wife at a party given them on the Colorado on Christmas Day, 1831. Mrs. Bowie was a beautiful Castilian lady, and won all hearts by her sweet manners. Bowie was supremely happy with her, very devoted and more like a kind and tender lover than the terrible duellist he has *since* been represented to be.

We need not imagine some fictional character for James Bowie in his thirties, before and after his tragic marriage. For except during that short period of "supreme happiness," we see him described as chivalrous, yes and valiant, but always, in whatever adventure, fearfully, incredibly restless. The marriage that could have given him easier outlet for his energies, had ended in death; now the years seemed to prepare him only for the Alamo.

Captain William Y. Lacey, one of the early settlers of Palestine, Texas, stated about Bowie:¹

Jim Bowie was like Barnum's show, wherever he went, everybody wanted to see him. From March, 1834, for eight months I was with him examining lands on the Trinity up to the Cross Timbers (now Tarrant County, Texas). He was esteemed wealthy. He seemed to be a roving man—sometimes searching for mines, sometimes fighting Indians, sometimes speculating in lands—and *always a gentleman from bottom to top*. He was accommodating, kind, and always had plenty of money. He was not in the habit of using profane language, and never used an indecent or vulgar word during the eight months I passed with him in the wilderness."

¹ John Henry Brown, *Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas*, 137.

General Sam Houston wrote:²

On the 17th December I wrote to Colonel James Bowie, directing him . . . to make a descent on Matamoras. . . . Col. Bowie did not receive the order . . . was not apprised of it until the 1st January at San Felipe. My reason for ordering Col. Bowie on the service was his familiar acquaintance with the country . . . the nature of the population through which the troops must pass, as also their resources; and to this I freely add that there is no man on whose forecast, prudence and valor I place a higher estimate than Colonel Bowie.

General J. E. Jefferson, of Seguin, Texas:³

I knew Bowie in Natchez in 1829, traveled with him on steamboats and stopped with him at taverns; knew that he stood high as a citizen and a gentleman; that he was of incorruptible integrity, never violating plighted faith; that he was not a professional gambler, though he and almost everyone in that section in those days played poker and other games. He owned a large plantation, called Sedalia, and negroes, near Natchez, on the west side of the Mississippi. Natchez-under-the-hill was then a sink of iniquity beyond realization at this day (1880) and gave, very unjustly, a bad repute abroad to all the surrounding country. It was the gateway of the Bowies from their home into Natchez, and romance has connected their names with many affairs therein with which there was no slightest attachment.

And Captain Archibald Hotchkiss, of Palestine, Texas:⁴

I first met (Bowie) in Washington City in 1832. He was over six feet high, well-proportioned, strong and muscular,

2. J. M. Morphis, *History of Texas*, (II), 140, 141.

3 Both excerpts from John Henry Brown, *The Encyclopedia of the New West*, 436, 437.

4 *Ibid.*

with auburn hair and dark-blue eyes. He was a splendid man in appearance, with intelligence and energy strongly marked on his face. In Washington he was finely but not gaudily dressed; but in Texas he usually dressed plainly. Again I saw him at the convention of April, 1833, in San Felipe, and, after its adjournment, traveled with him and other gentlemen to Brazoria. This party included General Sam Houston, General John T. Mason, General Arnold, Samuel Sawyer, Captain Henry S. Brown, Thomas J. Chambers and Alexander Sterrett, the last-named being Bowie's brother-in-law.

It was generally said that Bowie had been in several violent transactions, but *not on his own account*. When he espoused the cause of a friend he would adhere to him to the bitter end, unless his confidence was betrayed. I do not believe he ever had a duel on his own personal account.

James Bowie was indeed not a duelist in any accepted sense of the word. As before stated, we know of no fight in which he was the aggressor; rather, he was moved to battle by his desire for fair play to others, and his wish to protect the weak against the strong.

The countless tales in which Bowie is said to have dueled under bizarre conditions, are of course part cause for his reputation as one reveling in blood. But such of these tales as are not pure invention—like his “dueling across a handkerchief held at the corners”—are most of them enormously embellished versions of Bowie's fight with John Sturdivant. That battle, as an instance of Bowie's magnanimity toward an adversary, is well worth the telling:

Dr. William Lattimore was one of the most respected planters of the country below Natchez. He had a large country seat, hundreds of slaves, and raised a large an-

nual crop of cotton. Lattimore was a territorial delegate in Congress from Mississippi for 1803-1807 and 1813-1817. He was also a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1837, and served as a commissioner to locate a state capital.

John Sturdivant was one of the foremost gamblers and desperados of Natchez. Up to the time he met Bowie in their famous duel, he had twice killed with the pistol and once with the dagger, burned four houses of political enemies to the ground, and fleeced innumerable of the uninitiated in his three gambling hells. His houses were, of course, located in *Natchez-under-the-hill*—to have climbed the river bluff to Natchez proper would have meant his death. Known as a marked man from New Orleans to Cincinnati, he lived with a murderous crew, his employees, in the toughest den on the Mississippi.

In 1829 Dr. Lattimore, in the press of other duties, had his son sell their cotton crop at the Natchez wharf. Young Lattimore, a bright and promising young man, satisfactorily negotiated the business and secured the money in cash. But upon leaving the Cotton House, he was accosted by a stranger, a “runner” for Sturdivant, who with sufficient urbanity offered to exhibit the attractions of Natchez-under-the-hill.

Young Lattimore did not refuse the invitation. Like other young farmers “come to town,” he presumably considered this his opportunity to see some “life.” Accordingly he consented, and during the next two hours he and his companion entered all but one of the low dives in “the wickedest city on the river.” The “but one” was reserved for the last; and when finally the youth was led into Sturdivant’s main place of business, “well-greased”

with Monongahela, he was ready for Sturdivant's gambling tables. Soon, drunk, disheveled, and empty-pocketed, he was thrust out upon the street with the savage admonition to "Keep your mouth shut and go home, or in the morning you'll be floating down the river!"

It was strange chance that the bedeviled young man, friendless and alone, should wander back towards the wharf—and there meet James Bowie. Bowie, who knew the boy's father well, asked young Lattimore to take him to the place where he had been robbed. Upon reaching Sturdivant's, Bowie proceeded to the table where Lattimore's "roll" had been lost and, producing some money, asked the boy to play it as if it were his own. After watching the game a while, Bowie pulled Lattimore away and, seating himself, took up the play. Meanwhile, Sturdivant himself, noting Bowie's presence, had stopped at the table.

Before many minutes had passed, Bowie, who was a stranger to the dealer, detected the cheat. As soon as he did so, he got up from the table, and, gathering up all the money in sight, pocketed it. At this point Sturdivant spoke.

"Jim, you must be drunk. You know you can't do that in my place. Put that money back on the table!"

Bowie looked the gambler full in the face. "Sturdivant," he said, "one of your blacklegs brought this boy in here about an hour ago, and some of your professional thieves robbed him of his father's money. Now, I know his father well, and I won't see him robbed. I took enough from the table to repay the debt."

"That don't go, Jim," replied the gambler. "If you

take that money out of here you will have to fight me to do it."

"Very well," said Bowie, "how will you fight?"

For answer the gambler drew a knife from his belt and threw it upon the table. Bowie quickly followed suit; and as both men removed their coats, the dealers pushed the tables aside, thus affording room for the fracas. It was then agreed that they would fight with their left wrists tied together, striking across them. Sturdivant removed a long scarf from about his neck, and as both men received their weapons, a dealer took the scarf and bound them as required.

At Bowie's instructions, young Lattimore, who was now cold sober, took a pistol from the belt of his champion, promising to "use it quickly should anyone attempt to interfere."

One of the croupiers now took watch in hand, and at his count of "three" the knives clashed. Sturdivant made one stroke, which was parried by Bowie, who then slashed the tendons in his opponent's knife arm. Stating that he could not kill a helpless man, and that he was satisfied, the man who was later to make another Knife famous instructed the house-man to untie their wrists, and "attend to the wound of your boss." (It was Sturdivant who later hired the three assassins to kill Bowie, whom Bowie killed in his first fight using Black's Knife.)

It is remarkable that so many distorted versions have been reported concerning this not-too-sanguine, and very short-lived affair. It is probable that young Lattimore was used by Bowie as a means to an end. It was known that Sturdivant had been a close friend to Judge Crain, of Sandbar battle fame, and that he had made the remark

that he "would have liked to have been present at that affair, for then he would have skinned that 'possum'"—meaning Bowie. "Big Jim" had since been awaiting his opportunity to bring the animosities engendered by the Vidalia fight to a final conclusion. The son of his old friend Lattimore had provided the vehicle.

There are many more stories still told of Bowie throughout the Southwest, to illustrate his fairness and magnanimity. One such was told by the Reverend C. W. Smith, the first Methodist minister sent to Texas by the Conference. Riding on his way, reported Mr. Smith:⁵

I crossed the river below Natchez, Mississippi. On the first day after leaving the river I was overtaken by a large man, well-mounted and armed with rifle, pistol and knife. When we learned that we had a mutual destination, we rode together, and I was obliged for the company. It did not take long for me to discover that my companion had a full knowledge of the country over which we were riding. I had told him my name and business, but he did not reciprocate. He was a marvelous story-teller; this was, he said, his fourth trip to Texas, and he had had many wild adventures in the swamps and prairies. He told me some of them each time we camped for the night.

Soon after we crossed the border we came to a small village. I proposed to preach here, and the stranger assented, stating that he would attempt to round up a congregation. It was an open-air meeting, and, to my surprise, well attended. I was soon apprised, however, of the reason for the large attendance.

I opened the meeting with a few old-fashioned hymns, in which everyone joined, seemingly with a will. This gratified me, as I was certain then that I had engendered a feeling of good-will among the rough frontiersmen. However, when the

⁵ *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 28, 1881 (XXXIII, 44); John Henry Brown, *Encyclopedia of the New West*, 438.

hymns were done and I attempted to deliver my sermon, I found myself very rudely interrupted by hoots and catcalls. I could hardly hear myself speak, and was greatly dismayed. My companion, however, who was in the audience, suddenly came upon the platform. I told him that, owing to the interruptions, I was unable to go on, and had better terminate the meeting at once. He then said to me: "Mr. Smith, do you want to preach to these people?" I replied that I would like nothing better, but that I was afraid violence might result. At this he smiled, and there was a look on his face that frightened me. "If you want to preach here, I will see that you do so without further interruption," he said.

He then turned to the audience, holding up his hand to quiet a vociferous outbreak.

"People of Texas," he said, "Mr. Smith has come a long distance to see you. He has been sent out here by his church. If there are any here who do not care to stay for his sermon, you are free to leave, but, in any case, by God, he is going to preach, and you are going to stop this noise so he can be heard!"

There was a large and ferocious ruffian right in front of the platform, who had been very loud in his rudeness. He seemed to be leader of the rowdies, and he got up now, all bedecked out with knives and pistols.

"And who are you, my fine cock, and where did you drop from?" he shouted.

"That is immaterial," replied my companion, "but my name is Jim Bowie, and I rode from Mississippi with this man, and I intend to see that he gets a square deal."

At this there was a subdued muttering in the crowd, and the ruffian sat down. It seemed that my recent friend was well-known; at any rate, from that time on I can say that I never had a more attentive audience. This was entirely due, I could see, from some motive of fear or respect which they held for my companion, named Bowie.

Bowie had (despite his brother's assertion to the contrary) at least three duels in Concordia Parish, Louisiana. One of these will serve to illustrate and explain the motivation behind all of his physical altercations.⁶ While riding across a plantation on his way to Rapides, he once surprised a man who had a slave tied to a tree. The Negro was being lashed unmercifully with a whip, and the master ignored Bowie's demand that he stop.

Bowie immediately dismounted from his horse, went over to the tortured Negro, and with his knife cut the bonds to set him free. At this the owner threw down his whip, drew a pistol, and in a terrible rage rushed upon Bowie. As he pressed the trigger the hammer fell upon a dead charge, and Bowie closed in with his knife. The man attempted to flee, but Bowie was too quick for him. With a sweep of his knife he slashed his opponent's pistol wrist, nearly severing the hand. As the now helpless slave-owner stood aghast at his plight, Bowie removed his own neckerchief, constricted the flow of blood, and, mounting the fellow behind him on his horse, conveyed him to the nearest doctor.

Brave, cool, resourceful, and with a heart as big as his body, James Bowie once said, "I never fight when angry, gentlemen." We have no reason to deny his assertion. If, in the battles against Mexico, he was to be acclaimed our perfect knight slain against treacherous odds, he fitted the role not too badly. For just as all a nation needed to revere some chivalrous hero in time of war, so Bowie himself, in his restless questing, had long needed that cause to which he could give all energies, and if need be his life.

6 John Henry Brown, *Encyclopedia of the New West*, 438.

HE RODE DOWN the old Southwest Trail toward Texas. Down that same route, later on, would come the redoubtable b'ar hunters from Tennessee, those singing comrades with their trusty "old Betsy's," their stout hearts, their love of freedom. Bowie, who had followed the Trail many times before, now went to pave the way for all who sought adventure. He had come to Arkansas for a purpose; he had indeed desired a knife "for peculiar purposes."

Now he had the Knife and was going back. Back to that vast region with its international population of only twenty thousand, but with room for twenty million more.

Frenchmen of subtle courtesy were there, Spanish grandes, planters from the eastern seaboard and central South, a scattering of Mexican mixed-bloods, and Apaches and Comanches attempting futilely to defend their land. Choctaws and Cherokees, too, dissatisfied with the Indian Nation to which they had been assigned; some Osages; and men of Bowie's stamp, who, like Lord Nelson, had never made the acquaintance of Mr. Fear.

He had severed all home ties, this man who now rode toward Texas for the last time. Single-mindedly his interests now lay entirely in that vast land of the far Southwest. A conditional Mexican citizen since October 5 of the year before, now, in the early spring of 1831, Bowie went to fulfill the terms of the citizenship—to set up a cotton textile mill for the Mexicans. He went to his wedding nuptials with the lady of his choice, the lovely Maria Ursula, and to continue his long search for the

lost San Saba silver mine. He was headed finally, though unaware, for the Alamo.

Following his marriage celebration at San Antonio de Bexar, the redoubtable one gathered his party and set out for the San Saba. There were eight men, including himself, and two boys, one of them his black servant Jim. They sank an old mine shaft on the divide between Dry and Main Frio, a hundred miles west of San Antonio, and piled boulders in a circle as a bulwark against hostile Indians.

On November 2, 1831, at sunrise, the party was attacked by a band of 163 Waco and Tehuacano Indians. The day-long battle cost the Indians forty-two dead before they were driven off; Bowie was wounded, as were several of his men, and two were killed.¹

Bowie loved the wilderness, but his ventures therein were cut short by the war which all knew was coming, between Texas and Mexico; despite his friendship with the Mexicans, he headed a company of Texan volunteers, and on August 4, 1832, captured a Mexican garrison

¹ A. J. Sowell, in his *Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas*, would have the battle thus enlivened.

“Jim,” said Bowie to his black boy, “we have got to have water. Take the cans and go down to the spring and get it; I will cover you.” As he spoke, lead and arrows were glancing off the rocks like hail.

The Negro looked at Bowie, and shook his woolly pate. “No, Sar, Marse Jim,” he replied, his eyes rolling in his head like marbles in a cup. “Dem ole Injuns kin kill dis yere niggah ‘fo’ you could say scat twice! No, Sar; cain’t go!”

Bowie turned his fierce eyes on the boy and fingered the huge knife at his belt. “Jim,” he queried, “which do you fear the most; the Indians—or me?”

“Wall, now,” reconsidered Jim, his knees rattling like castanets, “ob co’se we all knows dem boys hab got to hab some watah so dey kin whup de Injuns—an’, sense you insis’, den by Gorry I’ll *voluntare* my sarvices! Whar’s dem cans—I’m off!”

commanded by Colonel Jose de las Piedras, and escorted them to San Antonio. Not war, still this was prelude to war, and Bowie fought for Texan independence.

In October, 1835, Bowie joined the volunteer citizen soldiery at Gonzales, and with Fannin commanded an advance of ninety-two men, who, at the Mission Concepción, two miles below San Antonio, at daylight on the 20th, engaged some four hundred Mexicans.² After a short contest the Mexicans were repulsed with heavy losses, the volunteers losing only one man. On November 26, Bowie commanded the volunteers in the famous *Grass Fight* on the west side of San Antonio, driving the Mexican irregulars into the town.

During the winter before Texas' establishment of its provisional government, Bowie asked a commission under which he could raise and command a regiment. Sam Houston approved, knowing that there was no man whom the Texans would more readily follow; and Bowie made his request of the temporary government at San Felipe. Action being delayed by factional strife, Bowie rose and demanded to speak. His appearance was thus reported by Lieutenant-Governor Robinson:³

Stepping inside the railing, hat in hand, with a dignified bow he addressed the council for an hour. He reviewed the salient points of his life, hurled from him with indignation every floating allegation affecting his character as a man of peace and honor, admitted that he was an unlettered man of the Southwest, and his lot had been cast in a day and among a people rendered necessarily, from political and material causes, more or less

² As estimated by *National Encyclopedia of American Biography* (IV), 611.

³ John Henry Brown, *Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas*, 136.

independent of law, but generous and scornful of every species of meanness and duplicity.

He said that he had cast his lot with Texas for honorable and patriotic purposes; that he had ever neglected his own affairs to serve the country in an hour of danger, had betrayed no man, deceived no man, wronged no man, and had never had a difficulty in the country, unless to protect the weak from the strong and evil-intentioned. That, yielding to the dictates of his own heart, he had taken to his bosom as a wife a true and lovely woman of a different race, the daughter of a distinguished "Coahuil-Texano"; yet, as a thief in the night, death had invaded his home and taken his wife, his little ones, and his father-in-law; and now, standing alone of all his blood in Texas, all he asked was the privilege of serving it in the field, where his name, so frequently besmirched by double-dealing, unspeakable cowards, might be honorably associated with the brave and true.

Not an indecorous or undignified word fell from his lips—he made not an ungraceful movement or gesture—but stood there before the astonished council, the living exemplification of a natural orator.

He tarried not, but turned immediately and left the chamber, satisfied that he would receive generous consideration, and returned to San Antonio, soon to be immured in a sick-room—a dark, little cell-shaped room in the Alamo—and there, after a siege of thirteen days, to be the last of the one hundred and eighty-three martyrs to yield up his life for his adopted country. In that memorable December, 1835, Bowie received his Colonel's commission.

James Bowie went to the Alamo. He could have gone anywhere else. The sun still shone on his old haunts in Mississippi and Louisiana, but they were not for him. He turned his back on safety, knowing that his strong arm might help insure Texan independence.

They straggled in one by one: hunters from the Cross Timbers; desperados who had sought sanctuary from the law in Texas, but who now resolved to die for her; others from as far east as Tennessee and Kentucky, knowing that a free frontier was at stake and desiring only to secure it; men from along the Red River, who were Bowie's old *compadres*. Last came that heroic little band of thirty-two from Gonzales who, finding their way to the death trap blocked, crawled to their comrades in the darkness of night, making their way through the cordons of Mexican sentries.

Finally all were there, Travis in command of the regulars, Bowie in charge of the volunteers. But Bowie, while helping build a scaffold which was to be a lookout post, slipped and fell to the ground, breaking his hip. Thenceforth he kept in touch with the situation from his cot, and on February 23, 1836, dispatched a note to the enemy forces under a white flag. This, the last letter Bowie ever penned, has never before been published. It is from the historical archives in the City of Mexico, and was obtained especially for this work:

By reason of having discharged a cannon shot from this fortress at the time of raising a red flag over the tower, and soon afterward having been informed that your forces would parley, the same not having been understood before the mentioned discharge of can(n)on, I wish to know if, in effect, you have called for a parley, and with this object dispatch my second aide, Benito Cameron, under the protection of a white flag, which I trust will be respected by you and your forces. God and Texas.

Fortress of El Alamo, Feb. 23, 1836

James Bowie (rubric)

Commandant of Volunteers of Bexar.

Benito Cameron never came back. And the crippled warhorse, burning with fever (and without medicine), gathered his weapons about his bed.

As the days and nights passed, there was no rollicking in the old adobe structure, among men who knew that they were doomed. No help had come to them, though messengers had been sent. Many, even most, could have escaped and thus saved their lives, but we know of no such suggestion. The defenders cleaned their long rifles, prepared bullet patches and flint, honed their knives on their boots, and waited. Crockett, never glum, made his homespun jokes, but they fell flat on those grim-faced men. On the morning of March 6th, the *Deguello* sounded.

It was not to be a major battle; the attackers were no large part of the Mexican army. There were few shots from the defendants. Then the thud of booted feet sounded everywhere; there was a scurrying, a few excited exclamations, dull sounds of bayonets plunged into flesh. Suddenly, all was quiet. The acrid smoke of battle billowed through open adobe doorways. The Alamo had fallen.

Inside a little room, two frightened women crouched; seeking to hide behind their skirts, were two crying children. In the center of the room, on a cot, lay a gaunt, emaciated man. He was dead. His right hip was encased in a rude box, showing that the joint had been fractured and set to heal. He lay back, full length, upon his bed, with glassy eyes staring upward as if in a last challenge to something unseen. In his left hand was a pistol, the hammer down; another lay upon the bloody blankets stretched, helter-skelter, over his legs. A long,

bloody blade lay on the floor, against the body of one of the nine Mexicans whom the Knife had killed.

The man on the cot had indeed died fighting. Five bayonets had impaled his body; one, through the neck, had broken off short, pinning him to his bed.

Six of the recent victors entered the room with muskets, bayonets fixed and to the fore. Their leader saw the living occupants and with a quick exhortation ordered the others behind him. Then, looking closely about the room, he stepped over his dead comrades toward the cot. His fellows, lined up by the doorway, peered at him—and beyond. Stopping suddenly before the death-bed of Death; even stepping back a little—

“El capitan Bowie!” he ejaculated; and as the others nodded grimly, his eyes caught a gleam from among the mass of blood. *“Madre de Dios! Es el cuchillo feral!”* he exclaimed. Then he stooped, picked up the instrument.

The scene before the Alamo was one of animated excitement. Hundreds of the recent victors were busily piling up wood in ricks one story high, while others stuffed open spaces with straw and dried mesquite. Some short distance beyond, another rick was being erected, but this was of human bodies, Mexican compatriots killed in the attack. Burro carts, driven by men and women alike, loaded bodies from the pile and hauled them away for burial.

A long line of staggering Mexican soldiers brought still other bodies from the mission courtyard. These were the bodies of Texans, some in their nondescript uniform of the border militia, others in buckskins and rough jeans. Their bodies, however, were not to be hauled away, but placed, row on row, upon the woodrick. Soldiers sprayed

oil upon this sepulchre, and at last one among them ran up to apply the blazing torch.

The huge bonfire was already blazing, its smoke billowing high, when one last body was brought from the Alamo. Its bearers did not, however, go directly to the fire, but laid the burden carefully before a group of officers, saluted, retired, and stood watching.

General Cos stepped forward and gazed down upon the sadly mutilated form. The hands were folded upon the breast, and upon them lay the Knife, wiped clean, bright and glittering. The General stooped as if to touch it, then straightened. He called to one of the soldiers, who came forward. Pointing to the body, Cos said:

“Era hombre muy valiente, no dejale quimar como un perro!” He stroked his chin; thought for a moment, then: *“Pero no importa; echale dentro.”*

The soldier looked at him: *“El cuchillo feral?”*

“Sí.”

Three more soldiers came forward, and the four grasped Bowie's body, carried it with a quick rush toward the fire, and swung it high upon the blazing pile. For one instant the bright blade left the corpse, hung poised in mid-air, and then plunged downward, point first.

General Cos called to his officers: *“Tengo miedo de este fuego; puede dar impulso a otros incendios!”* He was right. It did “start other fires.” A spark from the Alamo raced to San Jacinto, to burn in the hearts of Texans until their independence. While yet another spread throughout the Southwest, leaped the Atlantic, and started ten thousand forges roaring in England.

On the free frontier men would remember James Bowie, and call for his Knife.

AFTERWORD



ON KNIVES TODAY

IN AN ATOMIC age, the fear inspired by a knife may appear ridiculous. To a layman that is; I call as witness Rear Admiral T. D. Ruddock, Superintendent of the United States Naval Gun Factory in Washington (as quoted by George Dixon in his King Feature, "Washington Scene") :

We've got to resist this temptation to discard tried weapons until something better is proven. The principles of warfare don't change much.

Even today, with atom bombs, rockets, and all the frightening new things, we haven't discarded man's oldest weapon—the knife. And I don't think we ever will. It is still the basic weapon of warfare.

The man with the knife is the one who does the conquering. Nations can be softened up by bombs and rockets but it requires the man with the knife to go in and actually take the country.

Warriors exhaust their other weapons but they always retain the knife. The knife—be it sword or bayonet or dagger or scimitar—decides the ultimate fate of battle.

The fascination which a keen, scintillating blade inculcates in the human mind is not limited to men. One has only to visit a museum of antiquity, to note the interest with which people of both sexes view the collections of edged weapons. Firearms invite only a passing interest when knives and swords of varied kinds are on display. This is due in great part to the elemental nature of the blade, from which, at close range, there is no escape. A firearm is more or less an intricate mechanism, and many things must coördinate perfectly when it is put to use; on exhibition, it is presumably not charged. The knife, on the other hand, is a simple, one-piece, deadly instrument; one need only strike with it—and it is always loaded.

The knife played a great part in our Civil War, but at the end of that conflict its mass popularity waned, and it was not brought forward again as a major weapon until World War II burst upon the American people. It then regained its place as an Army and Navy side-arm of essential importance, especially in the Pacific areas of combat.

Scenes were reënacted then which must have brought a nostalgia to the few remaining veterans of our War Between the States, reminiscent indeed of the great Confederate army camps at Shiloh, Lookout Mountain, and the Wilderness.

Thus we find the Marine Raiders, under Col. Carlson: flipping their wicked, double-edged knives at trees from various distances.¹ All carried stilettos, but many equipped themselves with larger knives, like machetes. These blades were kept so sharp that if you set the point of one of them on your shoe, the mere weight of the blade pierced the leather. Each Raider carried at least one knife with him at all times, and one photographer became surfeited with the sight of a new type of knife every time he turned around. Finally one day, he sat beside a Raider who had found a likely-looking knife in a San Diego butcher shop. He expressed the opinion that the blade "didn't look so hot." In reply the Marine, with a deft swing of the weapon, sliced off the leg of the chair on which the photographer was sitting.

During World War II many of our men have secured or "collected" Japanese swords, then turned them upon their former owners. The Japanese sword has a history partly ceremonial and paganistic, but it is a weapon of real worth, and Japanese swordsmiths produce what are perhaps the finest blades in the world today. The weapons are not manufactured wholesale, but individually made, to be preserved from generation to generation. The techniques by which they are evolved are both ritualistic and realistic; among them must be steps comparable to James Black's lost twelve processes.

The first step is the forging of the steel itself.² This is done in a hut built specifically for the purpose, which contains the bellows, anvil, and hammers used by the

¹ Compare illustration: "Mississippians Practising with Bowie-Knives in Camp." Entire quotation verbatim from the *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1943 (LXII), 10.

² Following description after *Chambers Journal*, July 16, 1904 (LXXXI, 6th Ser. v. 7), 518, 519.

chief swordsmith and his assistants. The walls of the hut are decorated with *kakemonas* representing both the god of the swordmakers and the chief goddess of the Shintos. About the *kakemonas* are placed wisps of straw and zig-zag-shaped pieces of white paper charms intended to keep the evil spirits away. No women or girls are allowed in the building at any time, lest the demons which inevitably attend them injure the quality of the steel produced.

The chief swordsmith's shaping hammer weighs only two pounds, whereas the helpers use twelve-pound sledges. The metal used is Japanese steel, which is made by melting iron ore in a charcoal furnace, then dropping it in cold water. The carbon derived from the charcoal causes the formation of steel, which appears in lumps averaging one and one-half pounds each. About fifteen of these are required to make one sword-blade which weighs, when finished (without sheath or mountings), from one and one-half to two pounds. The great amount of metal required (fifteen times the weight of the finished product) is necessary because of the eagle eye of the chief smith, who is very careful to use only that which appears flawless. The metal is tested for flaws by heating, separately, each lump of metal to a high temperature, plunging it into cold water, and then breaking it into fragments, which latter are examined minutely. A fragment having glistening edges or uneven coloring is immediately condemned and thrown out.

When a sufficient number of pieces of good quality are accumulated they are set aside, following which the helpers place one of the original lumps on the anvil and hammer it into slab-shape. The slab is then reheated,

and while red-hot is creased in two parallel straight lines by hammering the edge into the flat surface.

The slab is then rendered brittle and broken along the creases, thus forming a rectangular slab some two and one-half to three inches wide. Upon this surface the chief smith then piles a number of the small fractured bits of the finished product, after which straw-ashes, earth, and water are mixed together, forming a putty-like substance which is smeared over the whole and allowed to congeal.

The steel is then placed in the furnace and heated to a certain temperature. The mass is then withdrawn, sprinkled with straw-ashes and pounded with sledges until it takes the form of a single ingot six inches in length, one and one-half inches in width and about one inch in thickness.

The ingot is then reheated and bent double lengthwise, after which it is again pounded out to the dimension recorded above. This process is repeated about *twenty times*, and after each kneading is carefully examined by the chief swordsmith, who finally passes it only if perfect. Three such bars are required for the making of one blade.

The helpers take the trio of bars, and, under the close instructions of their chief, pound them together as one until the whole finally takes on the true, if rough, semblance of a blade. The chief himself then takes the *shape* and pounds it with his smaller hammer, at the same time dipping the tool in cold water between each several strokes.

This processing has for its result the peeling off of a thin layer of scale, i. e., oxidized steel.

The sword-blade is next worked over by a finishing cutler, who uses files and an instrument resembling a

carpenter's drawing knife, after which it is hardened. (This is the most important step in the entire process; the artisan who hardens the blade actually is regarded as its maker, his name being the only one inscribed on the hilt following completion. His spirit, character, and personal individuality are thus supposed to have been absorbed into the weapon, which is good or bad accordingly.)

In the hardening itself the blade is first covered to the thickness of about one-eighth inch with a thick paste made by mixing a certain kind of fire-clay with water. The edge and point are then scraped clean and re-covered with a much thinner layer of the same substance. This is to give the cutting edge its temper. All openings into the forge are now closed to exclude the light, so the cutler may determine, by periodic observation of the heat-coloring, the exact instant to withdraw the steel.

The chief smith, who has been standing by, now takes a hand—since he is the final arbiter in the tempering process. He takes the piece, offers a prayer, and then pushes it gently into the furnace.

He then moves it slowly to and fro in the blazing charcoal until it is uniformly heated from end to end. The proper degree of temperature is gauged by a coloring described as "that seen when one looks at the bright sun with eyelids closed." Once this is attained, the chief cries out in a loud voice and withdraws the piece, plunging it into water of one hundred degrees temperature, and slowly moving it about until it is fairly cool.

The professional polisher and sharpener now takes the blade in hand, and after his duties have been performed the deities are marshalled. The finished blade is

suspended from the wall before the *kakemono*, along with offerings of sake, rice, and sweetmeats. The chief smith, the temperer, the grinder, the polisher, and the helpers then grasp their prayer scrolls and make their final offerings, after which all their male friends, close at hand and waiting, are invited to examine the weapon and partake of its makers' hospitality. As a final act the sword is left suspended all night before the *kakemono*, that the influence of the latter may enter into the blade. A Japanese sword, manufactured as outlined above, is capable of cutting through substances with ease that the ordinary blade will scarcely dent, and retains its edge under the most trying conditions.

The Filipino bolo-knife, while not in a class with Japanese swords, is one of the world's most savage weapons. Handled by the natives who are skilled in its use and filled with determination, it has many times slashed its way past superior weapons, and killed. In the spring of 1943, forty-five hundred of these weapons were manufactured by the United States Spring Bumper Company for the use of a Filipino regiment.³ They were made at cost from funds supplied by a citizens' committee of Los Angeles, from high carbon spring steel. The blades were heat-treated in pyrometer-controlled furnaces; and the hand-guards, drop-forged, were securely riveted to the heat-and-moisture resistant plastic handles. These knives were cheap, but tough; mass-manufactured but efficacious in either cracking coconuts or bisecting man or beast when wielded by strong arms.

The introduction of the Bowie-Knife revived the

³ The *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1943 (LXII), 11.

ancient tales of the famous blades of Damascus. The original Bowies, as made by James Black, owned all the qualities of the Damascus swords, including resiliency, temper, and cutting edge. Since no one can provide the formula for the Bowie-Knife, we should investigate what is known of the Syrian blades.

There were four qualities which distinguished the Damascus blade from those of previous and contemporary makes. These were: unexcelled keenness of edge; a peculiarly flecked and mottled grain, extending throughout the metal; extensive and perfect elasticity; and an aromatic smell resembling musk, which emanated from the blade *when it was rubbed or bent*.

Experts who have handled genuine Damascus swords have removed some of the romantic aura from these weapons, while retaining the facts of fundamental quality and exquisite workmanship. Emerson, in his *Letters from the Aegean* (London, 1830), stated that "the blade, although not so keen as a razor, is nevertheless better than any other. Wielded by a skilful hand, it could cut through a thick roll of sailcloth, a feat which could not be performed with any other sword or sabre." As to the perfume: "I never saw any blades which retained their perfume over a long period of time."⁴

The beautiful art-work with which the blades were usually decorated was termed "damasking," and was a process akin to mosaic work with pieces of metal inlaid; of engraving, where the blade is cut into; and of carving and chasing, where the figures are produced in relief by super-embossing.

⁴ *Penny Magazine*, April 13, 1839 (VIII, 451), 138, 139. See also *Harper's Magazine*, October, 1853 (VII, 41), 593, 594. See also *Household Words* (IX), 180.

The first method was the most painstaking, durable, and beautiful. In utilizing this process the metal was cut into deeply and in dovetail form. Fine gold and silver wire were then filled into the incisions, driven in with tiny hammers and fixed. Only princes and nobles could afford such work as this.

The second method, being purely surface chasing, was less expensive, and was performed mainly for those professional swordsmen and duellists who desired fancy weapons. This process consisted of heating the blade to a violet color, "hatching" it over with a knife and, when the metal had cooled sufficiently, drawing ornaments thereon with a fine-pointed instrument. Fine gold or silver wire was then chased accurately to the design and sunk into the hatches.

Benvenuto Cellini, who was the acknowledged master in damasking, states that he practiced until he excelled the finest Oriental performances. He speaks of the ornamental foliage on Turkish scimitars as representing nothing else but chicory leaves, "which weary with their sameness."

The Lombards make the most beautiful wreaths, representing ivy and vine leaves—which are highly pleasing to the eye. The Romans and Tuscans in their excellent work represent acanthus leaves with all their festoons and flowers winding into a variety of forms. Among these leaves they insert a variety of birds and animals with great ingenuity and elegance in the arrangement.

During the early part of the nineteenth century Clouet of France, a celebrated scientific swordmaker produced blades possessing most of the qualities of the best

Damascenes. No Damascus blade then in existence could be made to bend, without breaking, to a point beyond forty-five degrees. The Frenchman exhibited swords of his own making which would spring back to true form after being bent in a sixty-degree arc. Without giving away any of his secrets, he mentioned common steps to be taken in blade-manufacturing:

One of my processes involves the use of a number of thin plates of steel of different varieties, which are united lengthwise by forging and welding. The surfaces of this compound bar are then worked on with a graving tool, so as to produce a large assortment of varied hollow places, which are afterwards worked up and brought nearly to a level with the faces of the blade. Tress-like figures are thus formed, which has led to the name "tressing" as descriptive of this operation, from its resemblance to the natural curls or tresses of human hair.

I have also another method. A bundle of steel rods are first welded together and twisted at a red heat. After repeated twisting and forging the bar is left, through a last process, in a straight form. It is then split lengthwise, and the outside faces are joined by welding. This process is called "torsion," and by its use an appearance is given to the whole resembling the "fleckiness" of the Damascus blades. The block is then cut up into short pieces and united again by welding, after which an appearance of mosaic-work presents itself to view on both flat surfaces.

Try as he might, Clouet could never produce the so-called "watered" design on some Damascus swords; but a colleague, Breant, was successful in so doing. The latter was a specialist in the knowledge of the various properties of steel and iron, and his comments are informative:

I learned first that steel differs from iron in that it contains carbon in chemical union, which state is effected by subjecting iron in contact with charcoal to an intense heat. If more charcoal be employed with the iron than is necessary to form pure steel, two compounds result—one of steel and the other of carburetted steel or cast-iron, the latter of which contains more carbon than the former. When a mixture of the steel and carburetted iron is fused and allowed to cool slowly, a crystallized compound results, which, upon being forged into a blade and immersed in a weak acid solution, produces the much-vaunted Damascene water-mark.

I have also another method which is much more intricate, by which a steel may be produced far surpassing the quality of the Damascene product. This product is made by mixing iron filings with lamp-black; and many precautions as to proper temperatures must be taken when working with this metal.

The Bowie-Knives mentioned herein as having been made in England (and which were stocked in practically every kind of business house in America) were made chiefly at Birmingham from the best steel that Sheffield could provide. This steel was furnished the cutlers in bars called sword-moulds. Each mould was heated and shaped by hand upon the anvil. Concave blades, ornamented backs, etc., were formed by hammering the heated blade between steel bosses. After the proper form had been attained, it was hardened by being plunged—while red-hot—in cold water, and was then tempered until a film of blue oxide formed on the metal. The “shape” was then placed in a fork on the anvil and twisted to and fro, which process corrected all irregularities. It was then ground and polished and a handle affixed, after which it was subjected to severe tests of bend and strain.

These British-made so-called Bowie-Knives represented the best workmanship in ordinary blade-making, but were of necessity a travesty on the genuine article. Their manufacture was simple, and they were turned out in the "mass production" method of the times. They were probably as beautiful specimens of the knife-maker's art as the world has ever seen, but they lacked the enduring and finer qualities of the Bowie-Knife.

Knife-fanciers throughout the world have repeatedly stated that in their opinion the maker of the Bowie-Knife was a "natural." As to his method of making such blades, it was very nicely summed up by William M. Newsom, F.R.G.S., who stated in a communication to the author as early as 1926:

I do not believe this man had the "Damascus secret." I believe he had his own secret, which was probably as good or better. Being a cutler and ornamental worker in metals, he doubtless worked out his own method, and by a series of lucky incidences and coincidences, coupled with an insatiable industry and remarkable skill, evolved the weapon which brought fame to another man. In any case, his knives were already famous before Bowie arrived on the scene. The advent of Bowie into his life provided the vehicle needed to bring international fame to his products.

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